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APRIL FOOLS

a farce of manners

BY

COMPTON MACKENZIE

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TO P. G. WODEHOUSE

My dear Plummy,

A short while ago you told me you were re-reading Poor Relations. *With that in mind I am venturing to dedicate the sequel to you. But, of course, the real reason for writing your name on this page is that I want to be registered as one of your most devoted readers and to sign myself in admiration*

Yours gratefully,

Compton Mackenzie

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APRIL FOOLS

CHAPTER I

DRESSING FOR DINNER

IN what Mrs. Easton, the proprietress of Halma House, called one of her best rooms, which meant that it was rather more garish than some of the others in that Earl's Court boarding-establishment, George Touchwood was lying on an alleged eiderdown quilt, among the blowsy roses of whose pattern his face was not conspicuous, being itself as florid and heavily jowled as any of them. His opaque eyes regarded listlessly the plaster flower-bed in the middle of the ceiling. On one side of him a small haycock of knitting was waiting to soothe his nerves: on the other side the evening paper was waiting to be read. But George was worn out by his day, so completely worn out by it that the problem of whether he should or should not put on a dinner-jacket to attend the birthday dinner of his brother John at Hampstead was assuming with every minute that brought him nearer to eight o'clock a more insoluble vastness.

The First of April! Somehow or other before another First of April came round those two confounded children of his must be sent to boarding-schools. One did not mind a few mild jokes just to keep up old customs; but when it came to Bertram's borrowing the alarm-clock of the Halma House maid-of-all-work, and setting it to

go off under his own father's bed at half-past three in th morning, that was . . . that was . . . only a deeper flus of reminiscent anger in George's sanguine countenanc expressed the appropriate epithet, for George was feelin too much exhausted even to swear to himself. Eleanc had advised him to get out of bed, go upstairs to Bertram room, and chastise him immediately. So like a wife And then Viola had come in just before eight o'clock wit a face as innocent as an angel's and told him the house wa on fire, and when he had plunged out of bed in consterna tion, her mother had laughed and said what a little actre the child was. So like Eleanor! On the stage hersel she thought of nothing except the stage. The stage George's crimson darkened to purple. He was thinkin about that infernal brother-in-law of his who had give up being a clergyman to become an actor. And then i order to put him in the way of what she always calle "shop," Eleanor had calmly suggested that he with h wife and daughter should come and board at Halm House. Had anybody ever offered such a gratuitous . . . such an idiotic . . . such a wantonly unnecessary piece o advice before? It was typical of that false good-fellow ship of the stage. Laurence should have stuck to hi living. Clergymen had no business to start disbelievin in what they had been believing all their lives. Tha kind of thing was mere self-indulgence. At this rate th Bodega would presently be full of disbelieving bishop borrowing half-crowns. Here George's wrathful medita tion was interrupted. The door of the bedroom opened and his wife came rushing in.

"Oh, there you are, you old badger! I couldn't thin what had happened to you. There was only Laurenc in your sitting-room."

"I know he was," George replied sourly.

"Well, don't growl at me, you old bear. I didn't pu him there."

George looked at his wife resentfully. He had indee almost reached the point of asking himself at this momen

what he had ever seen in this big-boned hawk-like creature who had once appeared to him as the handsomest woman he knew.

"You didn't actually *put* him in my room," George allowed. "But you suggested his coming to live at Halma House."

Eleanor shrugged her shoulders with a tremendous gesture, and then shrugged them all over again, this time with an eye on the looking-glass to observe if it would be an effective movement for the new part she was studying. There was an exit in the second act . . . .

"You deliberately persuaded Mrs. Easton to let Laurence and Edith one of her best double-rooms with a dressing-room attached for Frida, whose whispering gets on my nerves more than the noise that our own confounded kids make."

"By the way," his wife asked sharply, "did you chastise Bertram for waking us in the night with that alarm-clock?"

"No, he'd gone off to school before I got down."

"But when he came back for his dinner?"

"I tell you he'd gone off before I got down."

"Do you mean to say you weren't down till after two o'clock?"

"Well, it's your fault. What's the good of going down to sit in my room just to listen to Laurence stamping about and spouting *Hamlet?* I thought I should go mad when I went in to read the paper after tea. You're out all day at rehearsals. You don't realize what I have to put up with. My nerves are all to pieces."

This sitting-room which was being desecrated by the intrusion of his brother-in-law was as a matter of fact not really his own sitting-room. It was one of those small nondescript rooms where the odds and ends of a large house pretend to be furniture, and where bicycles and tennis racquets wait for a fine day. George, however, had made a habit of sitting in it, and it was here that he read the evening paper, speculating upon the second favourites he would have backed if he could have found a

bookmaker to accept his system, and it was here that he knitted himself various articles of attire which he never wore, but which, in justice to George it may be added, he never expected anybody else to wear. His reputed business was that of a commission-agent for wines and cigars; but he seldom made any active attempt to earn money, and he attributed his lack of business not to his own indolence, but to the failure of Free Trade. He was a hypochondriac, and when he began to talk about his nerves his wife knew it was time to stop grumbling at him, because he was capable of talking doggedly for half an hour about his symptoms when she implied the least criticism of his laziness.

"Well, I did my best to persuade dear brother John to send you on that sea voyage," she told him now. "But I'm afraid Miss Doris Hamilton's influence is too powerful in these days."

"I suppose he'll marry that pretty secretary of his presently," George observed.

"From what I hear," Eleanor went on viciously, "there's apparently no need for him to bother about that. But whether he marries her or not, it will be all the same for his poor relations. As soon as I set eyes on that little affected vixen, I knew she would never be happy till we were all out of the way."

"I wonder if she'll be at the birthday dinner to-night," George murmured.

Eleanor's fine dark eyes glowed resentfully.

"Of course she will. I know that little mousy type of woman. They'll nibble their way in anywhere. Which reminds me. I've bought your birthday present for John."

"Have you?"

"Don't you want to see it?"

"No, no, don't unwrap it. As long as I know what it is, that's enough."

"It's a pipe-rack."

"Didn't I give him a pipe-rack last year?"

"Very likely, very likely," Eleanor shrilled in exasperation. "But a rich dramatist like John can't expect the husband of an impoverished actress to present him with half Bond Street every year."

"Well, don't start making scenes up here," George wearily begged his wife. "I should have thought you'd have been tired after rehearsing all day. I know I am."

"You? My dear old Georgieboy, what have *you* been doing since you got up this afternoon?"

"I had to listen to Laurence, didn't I?" Georgieboy demanded indignantly. "That's why I'm lying down. Why I was too tired even to read the *Star*. I feel utterly exhausted, and now we've got to go trailing over to Hampstead for this birthday dinner. I really don't think I *can* dress. I don't see why a family party should be turned into a formal occasion. I can't *think* why you brought Laurence here. I'd as soon be in the same house as Buffalo Bill."

"Oh, well, at any rate he and Edith can share the taxi with us to Church Row."

But George was not to be placated so easily.

"It's no pleasure driving in a taxi with one's back to the driver," he grumbled. "I've been very worried about my spine lately."

His wife might have retorted by asking him if he was afraid he had lost it altogether; but further argument was interrupted by a gentle tap at the door, and Edith, soft and pink and apologetic, came anxiously in.

"Oh, George dear, Laurence asked me to run along and find out if you were going to wear tails or a dinner-jacket to-night."

"Dinner-jacket, I suppose," said George in the tone of one choosing the lesser of two evils.

"And, George dear," his youngest sister continued in a flutter, "Laurence asked me to ask you if this was yours."

She produced from under a towel a stuffed trout affixed to a painted green mount.

"Mine?" George repeated, and even his dull globular

eyes emitted a momentary ray of astonishment. "Why on earth should it be mine? It looks like one of the fish out of the glass cases on the walls of my sitting-room."

"That's what Laurence thought."

"Well, they belong to Mrs. Easton, the proprietress. What on earth did Laurence want to interfere with them for? Mrs. Easton will be furious. Those fish belonged to her first boarder. She thinks a lot of them. He left them to her. Or he left them behind him. Anyway, I know he left them."

"Well, Laurence thought this one might be yours, because he found it in his bath."

"Found it in his bath?" George gasped.

"Yes, that's why I wrapped it up in this towel. It was all wet."

"But, good heavens, why on earth should I put a stuffed fish in Laurence's bath? I never heard such a preposterous suggestion."

"Well, there were some dead minnows in it too. Not stuffed minnows. Real ones. But Laurence thinks they may have been killed by the hot water. He always takes his bath very hot. It makes him feel warmer, you see."

"I told you to chastise Bertram," an experienced mother put in.

Edith turned gratefully to her sister-in-law.

"Well, you know, Eleanor dear, I half thought it might be Bertram who had put the minnows in Laurence's bath. But Laurence thought it must be George who put the large stuffed fish in."

George muttered angrily to himself, and Edith, who never supposed that anybody could be vexed by anything her husband said or did, and who was always kind, tried to make things right for her nephew

"Please don't be cross with Bertram," she pleaded. "I'm sure it was just a little joke for the First of April. And I got all the poor little minnows out with a sponge most successfully. So please don't punish Bertram. It

vould spoil Laurence's evening if he thought he had got Bertram into a scrape."

The kind-hearted creature deposited the stuffed fish on chair and fluttered gently back to help her husband ress.

"I'll give that boy the thrashing of his life to-morrow," eorge vowed.

"Yes, if you're up in time," his wife laughed.

"I'd do it now if I hadn't got to dress for this confounded inner of John's. I don't understand keeping up birthdays fter forty."

"Well, I think the secret is that John likes to remind us ll of his growing prosperity. But for goodness' sake, let ie get dressed before you start tearing down your clothes om the wardrobe like an old elephant."

George welcomed the short respite. He sank back among ie pillows and, pulling the floriated eiderdown round is legs, he began to read the neglected evening paper. leanor had switched on the light when she came in, and or quite half an hour before that he had been trying to ake up his mind whether the exertion of switching it on imself was worth it.

Meanwhile, further along the passage the Reverend aurence Armitage had just emerged from the bath-room. n his dressing-gown of vivid cerise satin and with a towel rapped turban-wise round his head, he looked like Prince oureddin on his way to interview the Beautiful Persian. may seem prejudiced to liken a clergyman to one of the nsual heroes of the Arabian Nights; but Laurence no nger regarded himself as a clergyman since he had signed the living of Newton Candover, and Sir Percy ortimer had offered him the part of a butler in his utumn production. As the brother-in-law of John ouchwood, the immensely popular romantic playwright, aurence had found the heavily guarded route to the famous tor-manager's personal shrine in the Athenæum Theatre ss impenetrable than most suitors. There were legends Maiden Lane of actors and actresses who had been trying

for over twenty years to obtain the grace of an interview with Sir Percy and who had never succeeded in getting past the third commissionaire.

"Any formal abrogation of my priestly office," Laurence had proclaimed with that rich intonation which when he was a curate had led several church-workers to prophesy that one day he would be wearing the episcopal apron, "any formal abrogation," he had repeated, "would cause pain to many simple souls. That I have ceased to be able to accept the Virgin Birth as an historical fact is surely a matter between me and my God. I do not wish to have it blazoned abroad. No, no, let me glide forth unnoticed from the calm haven of Faith to breast the turbulent sea of Modern Life. If my frail craft sink, so be it. I am ready to face the Great Unknown without flinching."

And Laurence, who now wrote his name "Armytage" instead of 'Armitage,' had managed to persuade himself that he had only done this to make his name less conspicuous, though to one or two of his friends and relations he did confide that he fancied the "y" gave his name a dramatic, ay, even a positively poetic glamour.

When Laurence as a tall young curate had won Edith Touchwood's heart, he must have been a remarkably handsome man, and now at forty-one, even if many years of unruffled complacency had given his face and figure a somewhat too suave outline, he was still a remarkably handsome man.

"Well, my dear," he intoned, when he re-entered their room and interrupted poor Edith's desperate attempt to fling herself into her evening frock so that she might be able to devote her unagitated attention to the vesting of her husband. "Well, my dear, I have finished my ablutions without suffering the fate of Jonah in my own bath. Indeed, I should have been finished some time ere now," he added with a hint of something exactly midway between reproof and reproach, "if you, my dear, had not dropped upon the cork mat one of those little creatures you fished out of the bath. The result was that in getting out I

rod upon it and had quite a task to—ah—desquamate the ninute scales which adhered to the ball of my foot in a nost pertinacious manner."

"Oh, I am so sorry, Laurence," his wife woofed from he folds of her evening frock, with which in her anxiety o be ready she had involved her head. "I thought I iad . . ." but what she had thought was inaudible, ecause a large lump of chiffon entered her mouth at that noment and smothered her voice. With a last convulsive ffort she fought herself free of the dress as a diver from eaweed and rose gasping to the surface, her forehead onsiderably scratched.

"Oh, dear," she panted. "I see now what I was doing. was putting my frock on inside out. No wonder I cratched myself with the galloon."

"No wonder," Laurence gently agreed, "whatever veapon that may be. But would it not be wise next time, Edith dear, to make sure beforehand that your frock is iot inside out? Now, you see, you'll have to repeat that ong process, while I sit here waiting for my evening clothes, vhich do not seem to have—ah—materialized yet from the vardrobe."

"No, dear, I know. I am so sorry," said Edith. "I vas explaining to George and Eleanor about the stuffed ish which kept me back. I meant to have all your things aid out for you."

"Well, anyway, it cannot be helped now," Laurence lecided graciously. "But you'd better not try to do nything till you have definitely got your frock on right. notice that we are already within a quarter of an hour f seven o'clock. Remember, Hampstead is a long league rom Earl's Court. Even with the fastest taxicab we shall equire at least half an hour to convey us to the feast in ime for the appointed hour."

"I know, dear; I am so sorry."

"That's all right, my dear. And now do not let us vaste time repining over the past. I merely mentioned he hour to suggest you should not waste any more time

than is absolutely necessary to equip yourself for the—ah—fray."

"No, dear, I won't," Edith assured him as she began to extract herself from the frock very cautiously so as to avoid any more scratches.

Meanwhile, Laurence stood in front of the toilet-glass and slowly unwound the turban of bath-towel which had protected from the water his long wavy hair that was now so becomingly grey at the temples.

"I fancy," he observed, "that the hard work and worry of the last few months have etched themselves upon my face. Don't you think so, Edith?"

But Edith's reply was lost in fresh folds, and Laurence turned round to ask, this time a little irritably, if she intended to spend the rest of the evening in dressing and undressing herself.

"We shall end up by being late for dinner," he prophesied. "And I was particularly anxious to have a few moments alone with our excellent John."

Edith, free at last of her dress, was now so deep inside the wardrobe that she did not hear this remark at all.

"Good gracious me, my dear, must you always be out of communication when I am trying to take advantage of having a few minutes together to discuss the little problems of our daily life?"

"I'm sorry, Laurence, but I thought I'd hung up your dinner-jacket in the wardrobe."

"Dinner-jacket?" Laurence repeated. "But I am going to wear my tail-coat."

"But George says he's going to wear a dinner-jacket, and you asked me to find out which . . ."

"George *may* wear a dinner-jacket. I prefer to honour the birthday feast of our excellent John by appearing in—ah—full regimentals. I am particularly anxious not to give him the impression that I was offended by his refusal to—ah—put up the money for my poetical drama. After all, if *Thomas* is ultimately produced by the help of others, John will be the loser. I want to let him see by the

crupulous correctness of my behaviour that I am not in he least offended. I want him to understand how well realize that he is no longer his own master."

Edith was a dutiful wife; but she still had enough of he old Eve to neglect for a moment even her husband's dressing for the pleasure of discussing another woman.

"You mean that his unkind letter to you was written nder the influence of Miss Hamilton?"

"Of his—ah—amanuensis, precisely. I am convinced of it. That is why I wanted to have a quiet little talk with poor old John before dinner. After all, though I may have shed the trappings and the suits of religion, I have still a better right than most to speak to John about the moral effect of this infatuation, and in short warn him of he danger that a wealthy bachelor . . . but, Edith, may I remind you that I am still standing here in my dressing-gown and still hoping for my—ah—trousers? Don't let us waste any more time in these little discussions, or we shall be most painfully late. By the way, did you succeed n choosing a worthy present for the hero of to-night's ittle feast?"

Edith turned away once more from her search for the clothes to show him the pink tea-cosy she had bought for her brother's birthday.

Laurence sniffed critically.

"An excellent gift emanating from you alone, Edith; but, inasmuch as I share with you in commemorating hese auspicious anniversaries, I should have preferred something rather less peculiarly feminine. This is the kind of—ah—comfort with which I was continually being presented when I was a curate. Yes, I think you might have shown a little more originality, Edith. However . . . I am still without my trousers . . . thank you."

But just as Laurence was about to invest his legs with hem there was a rap on the dressing-room door.

"Who is knocking?" he intoned, his trousers held in ront of him, the way a sack is held to be filled with potatoes.

"It's Frida," his wife hurriedly explained.

Laurence allowed one trouser-leg to stand at ease, while he held up a slim white pontifical hand.

"My dear, let the child speak up clearly on her own behalf. She cannot go through life mumbling at keyholes." He raised his voice to a chant. "Who is knocking?"

A faint voice on the other side of the door murmured timidly:

"It's me."

Laurence sighed deeply and shook his head.

"I suppose that by 'me' father is to understand that his little Frida wants to come in?"

There sounded the gulp of a hastily swallowed affirmative on the other side of the door.

"Wait a moment, Frida," he intoned, and when he had made a dignified entrance into his trousers he intoned again with heightened majesty: "Frida may come in now."

A fair lank-haired little girl of about eleven ran across the room and whispered something in her mother's ear.

"Are you sure you've looked for it everywhere, darling?"

"Looked for what?" Laurence inquired.

The agony of imperilled discretion pursed up his wife's ill-defined lips. She even ventured to put a finger to them. Laurence knew that he had trespassed beyond the bounds of legitimate paternal curiosity, and to preserve his dignity as a husband and a father he hummed to himself the air of some old hymn familiar since earliest childhood.

"I'll come and see about it, darling," Edith promised her daughter. Then, as Laurence's eyebrows arched themselves in pained surprise, she added quickly, "as soon as I have put father's studs in his shirt. Run along, darling. I'll come in and see about it in a minute."

But the robing was not to continue for long uninterrupted. Presently without any preliminary rap the door of the dressing-room burst open and Frida, half undressed, rushed in, shrieking that her face had turned blue. And

ndeed she was not exaggerating. It had turned a bright, even a vivid blue.

"What on earth have you been doing to yourself?" her father demanded. "Have you been playing with gunpowder?"

"Oh, Laurence dear, would she play with gunpowder at this time of the evening?"

"Or at any time, I should hope," said Laurence. 'Gunpowder was not invented for little girls to play with."

"I haven't been playing with gunpowder. I haven't been doing anything," Frida sobbed, hiding her face against her mother's moiré petticoat, which being already blue did not receive so much visible damage as a less sympathetic colour. "I only sponged my face like I do always."

"As I do always," Laurence interposed gravely. "We do not use 'like' with the verb."

But Frida had passed beyond the appreciation of grammar.

"And when I saw my face in the glass it was all blue."

"Excuse me, dear," Edith begged her husband. "I really must go and investigate what has been going on in Frida's room."

She came back to find him standing in front of the glass with a still unfastened collar.

"Please, Edith," he protested. "Please! I want your help with this stud."

"I'm sorry, dear," and for the first time there was a touch of irritation in Edith's voice, "but some blue stuff has got into poor little Frida's sponge, and I must wash my hands before I can help you with your collar."

"But why does she choose the moment I'm trying to fasten my collar to do these things?"

"It's not her fault, dear," Edith almost snapped. "I suppose her cousins have been playing a trick on her. The poor child's room is all upside down. She can't even get into her nightdress. Somebody has sewn up the

sleeves. And in turning down the bed we found it full of all her treasured little knick-knacks. I must get her quietly off to sleep before we go. Otherwise she'll be waking up when we're out and screaming. She's all of a shake, poor child. I really must ask Eleanor to tell Bertram and Viola to be more considerate."

It was twenty minutes to eight before Edith and Laurence and Eleanor and George set out to John Touchwood's birthday dinner at 36 Church Row, Hampstead. And as the taxi turned the corner of Earl's Court Square a small head leaning out of a window on the top floor but one of Halma House said to another small head that was doing likewise :

"I say, bother, I've thought of another fizzing April Fool joke, and it's too late now."

"What was it, Bertram ? "

"Why, I could have told the taxi-driver to go to uncle James's house instead of uncle John's."

"Oh, what a pity," sighed his sister Viola. "Still, you can't really make an April Fool of anybody after twelve o'clock," she reminded him for consolation.

"Well, you can if you do," Bertram argued. "The only thing I can't make out is why father didn't get in a wax about those blackbeetles I put in his egg this morning."

"Perhaps he didn't crack it," Viola suggested.

"I don't think he could have done. I put six inside and a spider. Only, I think the spider was dead. My gum, I wish it was April Fools' Day every day ! "

"So do I," she agreed. "I think it's the next best day to Christmas."

"I think it's better than Christmas," he said. "Only I wish we'd been at Ambles with uncle John."

They were silent for a moment, thinking of their uncle's jolly house in the country.

"Well, I wouldn't have wanted to make him so much of an April Fool," said Viola.

"Well, of course not, you fat ass," her brother scoffed. "I was thinking about aunt Hilda."

"Oh, yes," she gurgled.

"And Harold."

"And Harold!" she echoed rapturously.

The children sat with their elbows on the sill, gazing into the starlit London night, sat there in a mute ecstasy of imaginary jokes at the expense of their spectacled cousin Harold and of their disagreeable yellow-faced Aunt Hilda.

"I wonder why uncle John has aunt Hilda to look after Ambles for him," said Bertram at last. "I wouldn't."

"Who would you have?"

"I'd have Miss Hamilton. I think she's a ripper."

"Would you have made her an April Fool if you could?"

"Well, yes," said Bertram, sticking to the rigour of custom. "You can't let anybody off being an April Fool. But I'd have only done something she wouldn't mind."

"Bertram?" his sister inquired after a pause a little anxiously. "You aren't dead nuts on Miss Hamilton, are you?"

"Of course not, you fat ass."

"Well, you won't be dead nuts on anybody for a long time, will you?" she pressed.

"Of course, I shan't, you cuckoo."

"Because there's a girl at my school whose brother is dead nuts on a girl, and he does nothing except shut himself up in his bedroom and read novels full of love and rot like that."

"Good lummy," Bertram apostrophized. "What a frightful ass! But you wouldn't mind if uncle John married Miss Hamilton?"

"No, I wouldn't mind if uncle John married her. But I wouldn't like *you* to."

It was against the rules, but Viola put out a small hand in the starlight and felt for her brother's ink-grimed hand. It was against the rules, but Bertram had had a day unmarred by one failure. He had even succeeded in

twice making an April Fool of his schoolmaster. He accorded his sister's small hand an answering grip.

"Well, shut up being an ass, you fat ass," he muttered severely.

And she just cooed once to herself before she gave her entire attention to her twelve-year-old brother's plans for All Fools' Day a year hence.

CHAPTER II

WAITING FOR DINNER

JAMES, the head of the Touchwood family, was what even so late as the first decade of the twentieth century was still called a literary man. Nowadays, he would be called a free-lance journalist. Both names —and particularly the second—convey the impression of a happy, careless existence which makes a profit out of pleasure and a pastime out of work; and both names lie. In *Who's Who* James was stated to have given up medicine for literature. There was in this entry the suggestion of a divine call. One pictured the Muses beckoning to him from the slopes of Parnassus. What really happened was that James inherited from his father a good practice, which he spoilt by his own bad manners due to a chronic dyspepsia. His first enthusiasm had been British dragon-flies; but having been forestalled in the monograph he was writing about them, chiefly because he was, according to himself too conscientious, according to his relatives too indolent to produce it quickly, James had drifted through an interest in French literature into writing about it. Like so many others who have written about literature he resented his inability to make as much money as so many of the people who originally wrote what he was writing about. And the success he resented most bitterly was that of his younger brother John, severe criticism of whose romantic plays he had sometimes written either under a pseudonym or anonymously.

This evening, however, James was in a better mood than he usually was on the way to dine with that successful younger brother, because he found himself able to afford a taxi instead of taking the long circuitous route by tube and omnibus from Hill Road to Church Row. This luxury had not been made possible by the sudden and unexpected response of the public to his last book on the French Symbolists, but by the loan of a thousand pounds from John Touchwood to enable a disappointed man to start a new critical weekly, James's belief in which betrayed in him the romanticism he so much despised in his brother. As for his wife this evening, she could hardly sit still, so intensely was she enjoying what she called the "ride." Beatrice had been the daughter of a Surrey inn-keeper, and though the other women in the family were inclined to look down on her for being just a little "common," none of them denied that she had been an exceptionally handsome girl and that, considering how near she was to forty, she was still an exceptionally handsome woman. As a matter of fact, Beatrice was only a few months nearer to forty than George's wife, Eleanor; but whereas she admitted her age, Eleanor, who had to remember that besides being Mrs. George Touchwood she was also Miss Eleanor Cartwright, an emotional actress of some reputation, did not.

"Eleanor says she's still on the sunny side of thirty-five," Beatrice had told her husband a day or two ago.

"I suppose that's why she still has to wear such big hats," James had commented.

Beatrice was remembering this sally to-night, and she was wondering if she could manage to let Eleanor know what Jimmy had said without seeming to be catty.

"Do you think Hilda will be at Johnnie's party?" she asked. "Or do you think she'll feel she can't leave Ambles?"

"Haven't thought anything about it," James muttered shortly.

"I shouldn't think, if she did come, she'd bring Harold with her," Beatrice continued.

"We haven't brought Beyle with us."

"No, poor old Bill Bailey! But I left him with a lovely bone. And you know Johnnie doesn't like dogs."

"He's a successful man," James growled, much as his own bulldog growled at unsuccessful men like tramps. "He doesn't require a dog to flatter him."

"No, but all the same I don't think he minds being flattered by his young lady. I wonder if he *will* marry her?"

"I married you."

"Oh, Jimmie, you are unkind," Beatrice murmured on a tearful note, for she cried easily. She had an idea that the facile expression of grief indicated a deeply emotional nature.

"And anyway," he went on, "she won't be able to make any more mischief as his wife than she has already made as his secretary."

"Yes, it was too bad of her, wasn't it, to go and tell Johnnie you wrote that article about his plays? After all, it wasn't as if you criticized him with your own name."

James chuckled sardonically.

"No, that's what stung poor Johnnie up. Still, I suppose a critic has a right to laugh at a playwright, even if he is his own brother."

"Certainly he has," she warmly and dutifully agreed. "Especially as you're four years older than him. I'd like to know who has the right to criticize him if you mayn't. Miss Doris Hamilton, I suppose! And when he lent you that money for your new paper, I suppose it was her put Johnnie up to askin' for the family portraits and the few little bits of silver we had left."

In the murk of the taxi James was scowling. He had never had the least affection for the two badly painted pictures of his parents, and even less for the portrait of old William Crawshay, his maternal grandfather, who looked, according to him, like a prize pig; but, when his

brother had made their removal to his own house a condition of putting up the thousand pounds for his critical weekly, *The New Broom*, James had felt that John was robbing him of the only possessions he really cherished. It had been a slight on his headship of the family. Nor were the silver fish knives and forks presented to Dr. Robert Touchwood by some grateful patients on the occasion of his marriage to Selina Crawshay in 1865 of much use to the eldest son, because he would never eat fish on account of its always being prescribed for him as a diet. Indeed, the only thing James had ever done with fish was to spend a year constructing a clock out of their bones when he ought to have been getting on with his monograph on British dragon-flies. Since John had appropriated them, however, those knives and forks had come to seem worthy of exposition in one of the show-cases of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

"I haven't managed to keep much," he had complained to Beatrice, "and now Johnnie collars the few little things I had kept. It would take a rosy romantic like him to be so ruthlessly practical. 'An eye for an eye, eh, Johnnie?' I said to him when he insisted on having the portraits and the silver in return for putting up that thousand for my paper. And he said, with that confoundedly self-satisfied chuckle of his, 'No, James, an eye for an I.O.U.'"

"Poor old boy," a sympathetic wife responded. "And it's left such a mark on the wall-paper where the pictures hung. You'd think they were still there."

But one person had been pleased by the change, and that was their landlady, who had chosen the paper and was glad to be reminded of its original colour.

The taxi was now grinding up Fitzjohn's Avenue on second speed, and Beatrice in the agitation of being about to arrive at her brother-in-law's house was trying to adjust her appearance, a process which goaded James into observing that he would as soon drive in a taxi with a fidgety ostrich.

"Jimmie!" she exclaimed in a sudden dismay.

"What's the matter now?"

"If I haven't forgotten our birthday present!"

"Birthday present? Those fish knives and forks were quite enough of a birthday present for Johnnie."

"But I'd bought him something special this year. I'd bought him a heathen idol carved in stone."

"Well, it'll do for a wedding present," said James. "Then you can kill two love-birds with one stone."

"Oh, I am vexed about it. I must have left it on the chest of drawers in the bedroom."

Then it occurred to Beatrice that James had just made a joke, and she was still laughing at it when the taxi turned round to the left and pulled up at 36 Church Row, Hampstead. James called after his wife, as she went upstairs to bestow her things, that she would find him in Johnnie's library. He was always anxious to get over that first entrance, because whenever he saw afresh that big double-room of fine proportions with its fluted pilasters, its cream-coloured panels and painted ceiling, its rows and rows of books, and its exquisite Aubusson rug, he was seized with such a violent spasm of jealousy that he used to feel positively sick. It made his own furnished apartment in St. John's Wood loathsome to him in comparison. However, on going into the library this evening, he found that he was the first arrival and that his brother was not yet down. James looked quickly along the walls. A dark flush swept over his sallow cheeks, an almost malign gleam flickered in his heavily-pouched yellowish eyes. So Johnnie had actually hung them here. He glared at the pink and white of his mother's youthful cheeks, at his father's expression of distinguished irritability, at Grandfather Crawshay's porcine neck.

"I suppose Johnnie thinks he's the head of the family now," he muttered wrathfully to himself.

"What did you say, uncle James?" sounded a voice, which, though still piping with youth, was already smooth with the unction of an inquisitive maturity.

"*You* here?" James exclaimed in a tone of disgust, for it was the voice of his nephew Harold, the twelve-year-old son of his elder sister, Hilda Curtis, whom he had supposed safely occupied in looking after Ambles, John Touchwood's country house in Hampshire.

Harold emerged from the window-bay where the heavy velvet curtains had concealed his presence.

"Here I am, uncle James," the boy proclaimed, his spectacles flashing in the electric light, his pasty cheeks rising like pies in the oven of his scientific ardour. "I was trying to see how many constellations I could see, uncle James, And I saw . . ."

"You'll see more stars in this room than you'll ever see in the sky if you don't shut that window. I wondered what was making this abominable draught."

Harold retired in a state of repressed astronomical knowledge to close the window.

"I could have seen more constellations, uncle James, if I could have leaned out of the window, but I was afraid of making my white waistcoat dirty," said Harold when he reappeared. "But I saw . . ."

"Don't chatter so much."

"I've been learning astronomy since February, uncle James, and I've got as far as the great nebula in Orion."

"I wish you had," his uncle growled.

"Well, I have. The great nebula in Orion is estimated to consist of a vast gaseous system which . . ."

"There's no need for you to add to it," said James, and he proceeded to dam the flow of Harold's information by asking where his uncle John was.

"I don't know, uncle James. I was wondering where he was when I heard you talking. Mother's upstairs taking off her things. We travelled by the five-fifty-six train from Wrottesford, and I had to have a bun at Waterloo, because I'm not used to late dinner, and mother thought I might be hungry."

"What on earth made your mother lug *you* all the way up from Ambles?"

"She wanted me to come to uncle John's birthday, because I had such a lovely present for him. It's my collection of butterflies and moths I made at Ambles, and she said perhaps, if I asked you nicely, you'd show me your collection of dragon-flies. Will you, uncle James?"

James scowled. He hated to be reminded of that mouldering collection which had once seemed as bright as the specimens in the cork-lined cabinet, such an iridescence of early ambition had quivered round it.

"If you take my advice, nephew, you'll leave bug-hunting severely alone," advised a disappointed man.

"Oh, but I do want to be an explorer like my dear father," said Harold. "Only I hope I won't be killed like he was by Indians."

"You will be, if you talk as much as you do now."

"Don't Indians like people to talk?"

"I don't know anything about Indians' likes or dislikes."

"Did my dear father talk a lot?"

"Not as much as his son."

"Mother says he was the bravest man who ever lived," Harold proclaimed.

"Well, he married her, so she ought to know."

"I'm awfully glad it's April now, aren't you, uncle James?"

"Not particularly."

"I am, because there'll soon be lots and lots of eggs, and perhaps I'll find the nest of a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. Did you ever find the nest of a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker when you were a little boy like me, uncle James?"

But James was spared even a surly negative, for at this moment Hugh, the youngest of the four Touchwood brothers, came into the room. At the sight of Harold standing in the middle of the largest rose on John's Aubusson rug, he exclaimed:

"Good god, you don't mean to say *you're* here?"

Harold turned his glasses full on the new-comer and began at once:

"Yes, mother and I travelled by the five-fifty-six

train from Wrottesford, and when we got to Waterloo I had to have a bun because . . ."

"Wow! Wow! Wow!" Hugh interrupted with a grimace.

Harold, his lips turning down, began to quaver: "Mother said I was so much better behaved than cousin Bertram and cousin Viola that she was sure uncle John would like me to come to his birthday . . ."

"Look here, my lad," Hugh broke in, "one more word from you, and I'll put you and your Sunday School treat get-up into the dustbin. Well, James, how goes it with you?"

James looked sourly at his youngest brother, not because he particularly disliked him, but because he was twenty years younger than himself. At Hugh's age he had been tall and thin with a long sallow face, and he had worn collars just as high as Hugh's were now, and in those days his monograph on British dragon-flies had not been anticipated by a prompter rival.

"Johnnie not down yet?" Hugh went on cheerfully. "In spite of his wealth he's as lazy as the rest of us. However, just as well, because I wanted to have a word or two alone with you, James."

The young man stepped across the room and rang the bell. When Maud, the statuesque and anæmic parlour-maid of 36 Church Row appeared, he told her to take Harold downstairs and lock him in the coal-cellar till dinner was ready. Maud looked as much startled as her impersonal manner allowed, and Harold's face puckered like a roasting apple.

"I don't want to go down into the coal-cellar," he began to blubber. "I've got my white waistcoat on. . . ."

"Well, take him somewhere, Maud," said Hugh.

"Perhaps Master Harold would like to go upstairs to Mrs. Curtis," she suggested.

"That kid of Hilda's gives me the pip," said Hugh, when Harold had been led away by the parlour-maid.

"His father was a terrible bore," said James. "Though

he did some good work on the spiders of the Orinoco basin."

"I never saw much of Daniel Curtis, luckily for me," said Hugh. "I was still at school when the Indians did away with him; but I remember he was always trying to find out how much geography I knew, and I wonder he had to travel as far as South America to get killed. And that brings me to what I wanted to say to you. Look here, James, I think one violent death in the tropics is enough in one family. I'm hanged if I'm going to be exiled to British Honduras, just because Johnnie's afraid I shall cut him out with that girl of his."

Hugh had flung himself down in his brother's favourite chair, and, leaning back therein with his feet resting on John's mantelpiece, he certainly looked deeply rooted in England.

"Mahogany-planting in British Honduras!" Hugh continued indignantly. "Just because John meets a fellow called Ricketts, who looks like the leg of a mahogany table himself, I'm to be packed off with him to British Honduras."

"He put up two thousand pounds for you," James reminded him.

"Just so, James; but if he hadn't put up two thousand pounds for me, he wouldn't have put up another thousand for you to start this critical weekly of yours. Your *New Broom's* got a mahogany handle. Yes, critical weekly is a good name, for there'll be a financial crisis every week, and John's will be the first of a long line of unpaid contributions. And that reminds me, why don't you devote a page every week to the criticism of architecture? I don't mind doing it for you—at a reasonable fee, of course, while John's money lasts."

"No, I'd rather you went log-rolling in British Honduras," James said.

"I'm not going to British Honduras. Simply because for a joke I wanted to see if I could cash a forged cheque, John tries to blackmail me into leaving England. Well,

I'm not going to. I'm going to start architecture on my own. I'm sick of working for other people. If John chooses to invest two thousand pounds with that lantern-jawed bounder, Mr. Sydney Ricketts, that's his funeral. And to-night, James, I'm going to tell Johnnie so. If he wants to send any of his relatives to British Honduras, let him send Harold. He'll make a more digestible meal for an alligator than I shall. Hullo, here is Johnnie at last!"

But it was not their host. It was Hilda Curtis with Harold holding on to her hand. She, like James and Hugh, was one of the sallow Touchwoods; but anger had lent her cheeks a faded rose at this moment.

"Really, Hugh," she began at once, "I think you take too much upon yourself. I particularly told Harold to stay quietly in here, and you calmly order him out of the room as if he were an intruder."

"Ah, but he wasn't staying quietly," said Hugh. "He was jabbering away like a young baboon. That's why I had to boot him out."

"Boot him out, indeed! One might suppose this was your house. John may not always see who are his best friends; but at least he had the eyes to see that you were better out of the country."

If Hilda had not been approaching forty, one might have said that she was flouncing about the room.

"He must have damned bad sight then, for I'm still here," her brother guffawed.

"Hugh, is it asking too much of you to refrain from using bad language in front of a child?"

"Yes, it is," said Hugh. "Much too much."

"I won't ever swear, mother," Harold assured her earnestly. "But cousin Bertram swears, and so does cousin Viola. She said to me last Christmas at Ambles, 'Damn you, let go, you cock-eyed little ass!'"

"Hush, Harold darling, I'd rather you didn't repeat such things," his mother said.

Fortunately for the festive atmosphere Beatrice came rustling in, conscious that the elaborate black dress was

likely to suit her better than the elaborate black dress that Eleanor would probably be wearing. In case nobody should notice that her black dress was new and becoming, she immediately drew attention to it by reminding the rest that this was John's first birthday party since poor dear Mamma's death. However, as Hilda had already seen her dress upstairs, as James would be paying for it, as Hugh did not glance at it, and as Harold's glasses were turned on it less with admiration than with a kind of hungry inquisitiveness, Beatrice did not get so much pleasure out of her entrance as she had hoped.

"Where's all the others?" she asked. "And where's Johnnie?"

"I can't understand what John is doing," Hilda grumbled. "I telegraphed to him this morning that Harold and I wanted to spend the week-end in London because poor little Harold must visit the dentist on Monday, and I had no reply of any kind."

"Harold going to the dentist, eh?" Hugh asked with relish. "He'll make you squirm, my lad."

"Mother, my tooth's not aching now. I think it must be better already," Harold quavered.

"Do you remember when there was some talk of my becoming a dentist?" Hugh asked the company, regarding Harold the while with the expression of one who is about to carve a fat goose. A sudden apprehension seized the child. He fled behind his mother, begging her not to let uncle Hugh come after him.

"Please don't be so brutal, Hugh," Hilda snapped.

"What am I doing, I'd like to know?"

"You were glaring at the poor child and frightening him," she said crossly.

Beatrice, who had caught a delightful glimpse of her new dress in one of her brother-in-law's Sheraton mirrors, intervened:

"Well, do let's be cheerful. Where *can* Johnnie be?"

"And George is late as usual," James grumbled. "It's nearly a quarter past eight."

There was the sound of a taxi pulling up outside, followed by the noise of several people talking at once.

"Is it a street accident, mother?" Harold asked eagerly. "If it is, can I go and look?"

"Street accident!" Hugh scoffed. "Can't you recognize your aunt Eleanor's voice arguing about the fare?"

A minute or two later George entered, and with a vague greeting to the company sank down into the nearest chair.

"Well, George, old man, you look quite exhausted," said Hugh.

"I feel absolutely worn out," George admitted. "There ought to be more room in taxis. I was horribly squashed between Eleanor and Edith, and all the way up Fitzjohn's Avenue Laurence kept lurching forward on top of me like a ton of bricks."

"Well, you Touchwoods aren't ladies' men, that's a sure thing," said Beatrice archly. "Except Johnnie," she added with a giggle. "Why ever didn't you sit at the back with Laurence?"

"Because the back seats of taxis are a disgrace," George declared fiercely. "A disgrace to civilization! Besides, that infernal cloak of Laurence's gets all over anybody who's sitting next him. It's worse than sailing in a small boat. And then he tried to make me put on a tail-coat this evening. I'm glad to see you're wearing a dinner-jacket, Hugh."

"I had to, old man. My tail-coat's in pawn."

"What's in pawn, mother?" Harold asked.

"Hush, darling."

"Blessed little innocent! He knows all about the love-making of clothes-moths, but when it comes to simple everyday savvy he's as innocent as his own spectacles," Hugh jeered.

"Hugh, I must beg you not to talk like that in front of Harold."

"Turn him round then," her brother guffawed. "I shan't miss his face."

"Well, what is pawn, mother?" Harold tried again.

But the entrance of Edith, Eleanor, and Laurence temporarily postponed Harold's curiosity.

"Where's Johnnie?" asked Eleanor, who was anxious to get rid of the pipe-rack.

"Where's John?" asked Edith, who was equally anxious to disembarrass herself of the tea-cosy.

That Edith soon did, for Hugh snatched it from her and clapped it over the head of the wretched Harold, who, rushing blindly to the protection of his mother as he thought, charged into his uncle Laurence instead, and would have winded him but for the absorption of the shock by the tea-cosy.

"Careful, Harold," said Laurence gravely. "You must look where you're going; I am not made of india-rubber, you know."

"How can you be so rough, Hugh?" Hilda protested. "You might have broken his spectacles and put the poor child's eyes out."

"It is not like our excellent John to keep his guests waiting like this," said Laurence, who having been the cause of the late arrival of the Halma House party had been prophesying all the way in the taxi that the dinner would be spoilt. Even Edith, by the time he had burnt the soup, boiled the salmon to rags, and cooked all the flavour out of the sirloin, had been tempted to rebel against being given all the blame.

"We fancied that we were somewhat *en retard* owing to Edith's anxiety over little Frida's slumbers, but we need not have agitated ourselves unduly. I say we need not have agitated ourselves, George."

"I didn't agitate myself," said George. "But I could do with a glass of sherry."

And, like a genie, Maud appeared at that moment with eight glasses and a decanter of John's excellent sherry. She was followed into the library by Mrs. Worfolk, John's voluminous housekeeper.

"Mr. Touchwood asked me to say that he's very sorry,"

she announced, " but he won't be able to be at his birthday dinner to-night, and he'd be much obliged if Mr. James will take the head of the table."

" But where is he, Mrs. Worfolk ? " everybody asked in amazement. Mrs. Worfolk's proclamation had really stirred the emotions of the guests. That John, punctilious John, should invite them to dinner and then not put in an appearance made them feel that something really serious was going to happen. Even George was sufficiently shaken to rise from his chair and pour a glass of sherry out for himself.

Mrs. Worfolk feared for their ability to do justice to her dinner. She tried to reassure them :

" Well, Mr. Touchwood asked me to say that he would explain after dinner, and which is now served."

CHAPTER III

AFTER DINNER

NOBODY who had seen the company gathered round John Touchwood's table that first of April would have supposed that, like a lizard swallowing its own tail, every guest was being consumed by his own curiosity while he was consuming his food. James seated at the head had ruled out as a topic for dinner speculation upon the host's absence. Dyspeptic though he was always and pessimist though he was about everything except the prospects of his new critical weekly, James never dined in John's house without hoping that he would not have indigestion afterwards. Some of this optimism was due to the champagne which John never spared. This evening, seated in his brother's chair, he was inclined to play with the idea, when he was nearly through his first bottle, that this dignified dining-room was his own, and that the portraits of John's leading ladies were smiling down from the panelled walls on him. Presently, under the influence of a suit of armour that stood in the corner opposite, he began to fancy that he might condescend to write a successful romantic play himself. He went so far as to raise his glass to the suit of armour and thereby somewhat embarrassed Elsa, the other maid, who thought he was raising his glass to her.

"Well, Eleanor," he said to the sister-in-law on his right, "how would you like to play Sidonia the sorceress?"

"Why, is John writing a play about her? A strong part, I suppose?"

Eleanor planted her elbow firmly on the table and leaned over it in the way she did when she was trying to impress managers with the strength of her personality and her devotion to serious art.

"John!" the critic jeered. "John, indeed! *I'm* to be the author of *Sidonia*, and in the last scene you shall be burnt alive. In fact your death will wind up the play."

"That ought to go," Eleanor declared, with all the voluptuousness which the thought of a final curtain puts into the voice of an actress who has been playing adventuresses for years and who as such has always been eliminated from the stage in disgrace about five minutes before the happy ending of the play. "Yes, that ought to go big. I suppose I should have a tremendous scream at the end?"

"Tremendous," James assured her. "Louder than an express approaching a station it intends to ignore."

"Do I hear you say that you are turning to plays, James?" Laurence inquired graciously from the foot of the table. "Our excellent John will have to look to his—ah—laurels. You know, don't you, that I have abandoned my proposed poetic drama on the life of the apostle *Paul* for what I am inclined to think will be the richer subject of *Peter?* I had in my mind's eye cast Eleanor for the part of Sapphira. It has seemed to me that the abrupt death of Sapphira in violent convulsions may well shake the nerves of even the most sophisticated audience."

"I'll have a little more beef, Maud," interposed George, with as much ferocity in his accents as if Maud were Herod and she could serve him with Laurence's head on a charger. Before Laurence could resume his theme he was checked by Harold's diving under the table for a brussels-sprout which had bounced from his plate on to the floor. When the child emerged again, it was seen that the sprout had somehow managed to flatten itself on his forehead.

"Uncle Hugh kicked me over," he explained to the murmurs of astonishment from his uncles and aunts at the colour of his forehead.

Hilda turned angrily on her younger brother, who was sitting next her.

"How can you be such a bully?"

"Well, the little glutton shouldn't jab my foot with his fork," said Hugh. "He's been gorging steadily ever since we sat down. There's no reason why he should try to eat me."

"I thought it was my brussels-sprout," Harold half sobbed.

"What rot! How could you mistake my foot for a brussels-sprout? You might as well mistake your mother's nose for a parsnip."

"Well, really . . ." Hilda gasped.

"Oh, he doesn't mean it, do you, Hughie?" Beatrice beamed. "It's only brotherly love." Then, raising her glass, she peered round George, who rose between her and Edith like a red Devonian cliff, in order to drink her sister-in-law's health. "Chin-chin, old girl!"

Edith in response sipped so timidly at her champagne that she only managed to imbibe a lot of bubbles, which set her off choking.

"Gently, Edith," her husband warned her. "More haste, you know, less speed. Pat her back, George."

This request made George look round with such indignation at his brother-in-law that the horse-radish sauce slipped off the piece of beef he was chewing and set him off choking too. Everybody tried to talk about something else while George and Edith coughed away in two different keys, everybody that was except Harold, who watched them as intently as if they were two crimson-underwings in his poison-bottle, and Hugh, who loosened his own high collar in contemptuous detachment from the herd.

"In vino veritas," James suddenly observed apropos of nothing.

"That's Latin, mother," Harold informed her confidently.

"Yes, dear, I know it is."

"Not at all," said Hugh. "It's Greek."

"It isn't, mother, is it?"

"No, dear, of course not. Uncle Hugh is teasing you."

"Isn't he naughty to tease me, mother?"

"Oh, my god," Hugh groaned. "I can't stand this."

He stooped down apparently to pick up his napkin, and a moment later Harold let out a scream that might have made Sidonia the sorceress envious.

"Uncle Hugh's got hold of my leg," he yelled. "Ouch! He's pinching me."

"Hugh, don't be so abominable to the child," cried Hilda, thumping her brother's back.

"Ouch! Ouch!" Harold shrieked. "He's tickling me now," and in his agony he managed to knock Hugh's glass of champagne down his uncle's neck. Everybody agreed that Hugh deserved what he had got, and after this the rest of the dinner passed off without any more incidents.

It was not long before the gentlemen joined the ladies in the library, for James had to break up the conversation over port in order to avoid a detailed account from Laurence of his next play.

When the coffee and liqueurs had been served upstairs Mrs. Worfolk entered the library with a long envelope on a salver.

"From Mr. Touchwood," she said, offering the missive to James. "And he would be obliged if Mr. James would read it aloud, and which will explain why he can't be at his birthday dinner to-night."

There was a portentousness in the rich rustle of the housekeeper's slow and solemn advance toward James's chair, and a silence of something like awe fell upon the assembled company. When Harold, who was crammed with food and glistening like a bladder of lard, gave a loud hiccup, even his mother frowned at him not less deeply than the others.

"From Mr. John, eh?" said James, eyeing the envelope a little nervously.

"Yes, sir, and which he would be obliged if you would read it aloud," Mrs. Worfolk insisted.

Standing there she suggested a nurse presiding over an envelope of Seidlitz powder, and it was not until James broke the seal in her presence that she retired from the room.

Harold's eyes, bulging and semi-luminous like those of a fish in the profounder oceanic deeps, followed her spacious figure through the door and then fixed themselves upon the large sheet of paper which his uncle James was slowly drawing from the envelope.

"It is typed," James announced.

"*That* is not surprising," Eleanor observed with a bitter smile.

"Shall I read it for you?" Laurence suggested. "I am used in the pulpit to . . ."

James ejaculated a sharp negative, and began:

"*36 Church row,*
"*Hampstead,*
"*N.W.*
"*March 29th.*

"*My dear Relations,*

"*When you read this I shall be far away on my honeymoon with Mrs. John Touchwood, my former secretary.*"

A simultaneous gasp was emitted by the listeners. It was as if their host's warm library had been suddenly filled with cold water and they had all of them just struggled to the surface.

"I knew it," cried Hilda, with what John himself in a scene of medieval emotion might have called an eldritch laugh. "And that's why he never answered my telegram about staying here over the week-end."

"Well, it was what we might have expected," said Eleanor, in the burning contralto she used on the rare

occasions when she was playing a sympathetic part. "Poor old John! Hooked!"

"But fancy not tellin' us," Beatrice commented. "But there, I suppose secrecy runs in the Touchwoods. I haven't forgotten the way I was never told about the day of poor dear mamma's funeral."

Usually Hilda took up this challenge, for it had been she who had forgotten to warn Beatrice of the day that old Mrs. Touchwood was to be buried; but the news about John had been too much of a shock. She gazed mournfully at her son.

As for Edith, her pink cheeks deepened a shade; but she said nothing. She was thinking sentimentally about her favourite brother as he had looked when he had confided to her that he was going to be a writer.

"Well, that settles Harold's chance of being the heir of Redclyffe," said Hugh, "for John will have a romantic addition to his repertory every year now."

"Steady, Hugh, steady! We've—ah—joined the ladies," Laurence reminded him.

"Yes," Hugh went on without even glancing at his brother-in-law. "'Bubbles,' and 'The Boyhood of Raleigh,' and 'Carnation Lily, Lily Rose.' Can't I see them all in the Academy! 'Daydreams' or 'The Children of John Touchwood, Esquire.' Oh, can't I see them! Straight from paradise! Harold, my lad, you'd better go stork-shooting with that air-gun of yours."

"This is rather—ah—Rabelaisian, Hugh," Laurence protested again.

"No marriage fees for you, Lorenzo," Hugh chuckled. "You slipped out of your surplice just too soon. Well, I knew Johnnie was willing," he went on, "but I wasn't too sure if the filly would take the hurdle."

"You don't suppose a woman like that would miss a chance of marrying John?" Eleanor sneered.

"Woman like what?" Hugh mocked. "I wouldn't have minded marrying her myself, and I don't believe the little lady would have objected to me if Johnnie's heart

had not been of pure eighteen-carat gold. Once I loved a maiden fair," he hummed. "But, alas, Doris was like every other woman."

"We didn't marry for money," Hilda and Eleanor and Beatrice simultaneously declared.

"Ah, and don't you wish you had?" the last bachelor Touchwood laughed.

"There's a lot more yet in this letter," James interposed gruffly.

> "*Since you have attributed to us every link except that of matrimony you will no doubt be glad of this opportunity to contradict the outrageous tales you have most of you been at such pains to invent and circulate.*"

"Well, and weren't all the outrageous tales only too true?" Eleanor demanded. "Isn't this letter the proof of them? Why slip off and get married in a hurry like this unless . . ." and then Eleanor stopped abruptly, because she had caught the gleam in Harold's glasses. She had perceived that he was standing there on the very brink of life's secret, waiting for her to solve a mystery which had been perplexing his youthful brain for many months.

"Go on, Jimmie," she said, and Harold was so full of food that even to swallow his disappointment cost him a physical pain, the poignancy of which was expressed by a hiccup that sounded like a horse shying on a frosty road.

James continued reading:

> "*Realizing that this announcement will come as a sad blow, I am going to soften it as far as I can by making you a present of my country house in Hampshire, including the furniture, and I am instructing my solicitors to effect the conveyance in due form. From now onwards, therefore, one fifth of Ambles will belong to James and Beatrice, one fifth to George, Eleanor, Bertram and Viola, one fifth to Hilda and Harold, one*

fifth to Edith, Laurence and Frida, and one fifth to Hugh. I shall make no attempt to say which fifth of the house shall belong to whom. Possibly Laurence and Hilda will argue that out between them. . . ."

"Have we ever—ah—argued, Hilda?" Laurence interposed with reproachful suavity.

But Hilda was biting her lips, and did not reply. It had been bad enough when John had allowed Laurence to use Ambles as his own house after he had given up his vicarage at Newton Candover. Now he was actually to own a part of it, in fact as much as she did.

"*And if any structural alterations are required,*" James went on, "*no doubt Hugh will charge himself with them.*"

"Will he?" Hugh mocked, with one of those guffaws that his relations found so odious. "He's much more likely to charge the remaining four-fifths. I didn't become an architect to practise charity. Go on, Jumbo. Let's hear what else Johnnie expects me to do?"

"*The twenty-three acre field is included in the gift, so that there will be plenty of ground for any alterations or extensions deemed necessary by the future owners.*"

"Perhaps, but not at my expense," said Hugh firmly.

"*I have long felt that the collection of humming-birds made by Daniel Curtis in the Brazils should be suitably housed, and I propose that a portion of the stables should be put in order for their reception together with . . .*" James paused, then with a wry grimace he continued: "*together with what is left of the collection of British dragon-flies made by James. My solicitors will supply a sum of £50 for this, and Harold can act as curator of what will be known as the Touchwood Museum.*"

"Mother, what is a curator?" Harold begged. "Is it something nice?"

"A curator," said Hugh, "is one syllable worse than a curate. Curators under fourteen get spanked every morning before breakfast, Sundays included, and are dosed with cod-liver oil every night when the museum closes."

"Well, I don't want to be a curator," Harold moaned. "Must I be a curator? I don't want to be. Can't cousin Bertram be a curator?"

"Oh, do keep quiet, Harold," said his mother savagely. "I don't think John need have gone out of his way to insult the dead," she added to the others. "The living have their feelings."

"Hear! Hear!" cried Hugh. "But if you stuff Harold with a bit more, he'll be just right to put in a case beside the humming-birds, and I'll do a plan of the museum for nix."

"Well, I agree with Hilda," said Beatrice indignantly. "Why does Johnnie go out of his way to insult poor old Jimmie's dragon-flies? I am sure they never did him any harm. Never stung him or anything."

"Dragon-flies don't sting, aunt Beatrice," said Harold, himself again, after the first shock of hearing what was involved in a curatorship. "They don't sting, do they, uncle James?"

"No, but a slipper does," my lad," said Hugh. "As you'll find out when you take up your duties."

"There's some more about Harold here," said James, picking up the letter again to read:

"With regard to Harold's future, the family knows that I have invested £2,000 in the mahogany plantations of Mr. Sydney Ricketts in British Honduras, and if Hugh does not take up his post within three months I shall ask Mr. Ricketts to accept Harold as a pupil in five years' time. He had better begin to study Hondurasian, or whatever the language is called, at

once. Until Harold is called upon to make his decision I shall instruct Mr. Ricketts to put the interest with the capital."

"Mother," Harold asked, "is Hondurasian more difficult than astronomy, because if it isn't I'll soon know it, because I only began astronomy in February and I got to the great nebula in Orion on Wednesday."

"Well, why did you ever come back?" Hugh asked.

"I like the way Johnnie disposes of poor little Harold's future without consulting his mother," said Hilda. "He seems to forget that I've already lost a husband in the tropics."

"Don't you believe it," said Hugh. "That's just what he was remembering when he planned to send Harold out to plant mahogany."

"Mother, what does mahogany taste like?" her son inquired. "Is it nice?"

"No fear of Harold's being eaten by cannibals," said Hugh. "He'd wolf a whole tribe of them before they got a bite at his nails even."

"The less you say about British Honduras the better," Hilda turned round to snap at her brother. "We should never have heard a word about British Honduras if you hadn't behaved so disgracefully over that cheque. The least *you* can do is to go out there yourself."

"Well, if you'll let me take Harold with me now, I will go," Hugh offered. "I'll want something to frighten the snakes."

Harold began to dance apprehensively.

"No, no, mother," he wailed, "don't let uncle Hugh take me with him. No, no, please, mother."

"Hugh, I think you might have more consideration than to frighten the child like that. Just before his bedtime too." Hilda clasped the wretched Harold close to protect him.

"I shall never finish reading this letter, if you two

don't stop squabbling," James grumbled. "There's a ot more yet:

> "*While on the subject of nephews and nieces, I may as well say that the family pictures and the family silver will be sent back to Ambles to be held in trust for Bertram upon his coming of age.*"

"Now, don't blame me for that, Jimmie," Eleanor put in. "I didn't get at Johnnie to make him leave the things to Bertram."

"Why should Bertram have grandpapa's fish knives and forks any more than Harold?" Hilda demanded.

"Why should any of the children have them?" Beatrice clamoured angrily. "I think it's an insult to poor old Jimmie. First Johnnie insults his poor dragon-flies, and now he insults his—well, I don't mean that. But fancy givin' away to Bertram what belongs by right to Jimmie! I think it's disgustin'. I wouldn't have believed it of Johnnie. Yes, he may have behaved a bit funny lately since he got in with this wife of his—as I suppose we shall have to call her—but he never started givin' away what didn't belong to him. Well, I'm glad I did forget that stone idol I was goin' to give him for a birthday present. I'm glad I did leave it on the chest of drawers."

Beatrice had been getting shriller and shriller, and now her husband sharply bade her be quiet.

> "*Furthermore,*" he went on, when Beatrice's rage had liquefied into sobs, "*furthermore, I am prepared to pay for the education of Bertram, Harold, Frida and Viola at good boarding-schools.*"

For the first time since James had begun reading there was a gleam of interest in George's opaque eyes, and he asked Hugh to pass him the brandy.

James continued:

> "*Viola can practise her dancing in the holidays.*"

"That's a hit at me," Eleanor burst out. "That's because, when John had Bertram and Viola to stay with him, I was a bit particular about Viola keeping up her dancing. Go on, James, what's the next insult for me?"

"Bertram's future I will provide for when the time comes."

"Yes," said Eleanor bitterly. "I suppose he'll send him out to slave at mahogany. Well, he won't go. I'd sooner he went into the profession."

"I do not wish George to have any excuse for remaining at Halma House—and I have no doubt that a private sitting-room will be awarded to him at Ambles."

"Now it's poor old Georgieboy's turn," Eleanor declared in the burning contralto of dramatic compassion.

"In the event of undue congestion, his knitting would not disturb Laurence's poetic composition, and his system of backing second favourites in imagination can be carried on just as easily at Ambles as in London."

"Yes, I thought George wouldn't escape his brother's sneers," said Eleanor. "It's little enough he finds to pass the time away. I think Johnnie might have left him his knitting. George, you're too good-natured," his wife continued angrily. "You sit there, looking as if the end of the world wouldn't make you stand up for yourself."

But George refused to be drawn into commentary. He merely yawned once, and then poured himself out another glass of brandy.

"He hasn't finished with George yet," said James.

"I didn't suppose he had," Eleanor flung out. "Just because Johnnie's been able to help George once or twice

vhen I've been out of a shop, he thinks he can make a utt of him."

"George, old man," said Hugh, who had also been valking into the brandy, "the answer to that is to make butt of yourself. Have another brandy, old boy?"

George indicated his willingness by turning his heavy yes on the decanter, and letting his top chin squeeze the econd in a slow nod.

"*If George still hankers after a sea-voyage,*" James went on.

"More insults," said Eleanor. "Just because I told ohnnie that George's nerves were out of order and that e ought to have a sea-voyage. . . . Johnnie forgets that e has all the sea-voyages he wants, travelling over to merica to rake in money for plays which happen to be uccessful. Yes, but what's that? Anybody in the rofession knows that success with a play is just a lottery."

Laurence was on the verge of expatiating on this point, nd James hurriedly read on:

"*If George still hankers after a sea-voyage, the river with Harold and himself in a Canadian canoe will give him all the nautical adventure he requires. My solicitors have been instructed to place a canoe at his disposal. . . .*"

"Never!" Hilda cried.

"Oh, yes, mother," Harold begged. "Do let me have canoe. Oh, mother, please do! I've been longing for canoe. Oh, mother, I want a canoe. Mother! Mother! asked uncle John if he'd brought back a Canadian canoe rom America when he gave me my toboggan last autumn. Oh, mother, I must have a canoe."

"You'll feel sick in a minute, Harold, if you jump bout like that so soon after eating," she told him.

"Yes, but let me have a canoe."

"Don't be so tiresome, Harold. The canoe is for your uncle George," his mother told him crossly.

"But he's much too big for a canoe, mother."

"Harold," said Hugh, "if you'll keep your mouth shut and stop hiccuping, I'll see you get a battleship."

Hilda glowered.

"Cheer up," said James to her. "The next bit is about me:

> *"To James, who has so often reproved me for my optimism, I would say once more 'Beware of new critical weeklies,' and remind him that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. In other words, he has got a thousand pounds out of me, and he won't get another penny."*

"Hugh has got two thousand," Beatrice observed bridling.

"No, he hasn't," Hugh contradicted. "Harold has got it."

"No, Harold has not got it," Hilda snapped. "I'm not going to send my child to a white man's grave for a miserable two thousand pounds."

"Well, then Ricketts has got it," said Hugh. "And if you'd seen that lantern-jawed, blue-nosed bounder you wouldn't sound so pleased with yourself."

"Was his nose quite blue, uncle Hugh?" Harold asked.

"Where's that tea-cosy?" Hugh demanded, looking round the room.

James resumed the letter:

> *"Eleanor has shown herself so well able to look after herself that I am not going to insult her by offering to look after her."*

"As if I didn't feel what he said about poor old Georgie boy," Eleanor sniffed. "Never mind, perhaps now he's married he'll presently be wishing he wasn't."

"Hilda with her fifth of the house and her small private income will have nothing to do except fuss about the proportionate expenses of the various members of the family who choose to inhabit Ambles. I am affording her an unique opportunity of being disagreeable, of which I am sure she will take the fullest advantage. I may add that no financial allowance will be made to those who prefer to live elsewhere; but that I am prepared to pay the wages of three outdoor servants and a reasonable garden bill twice a year."

"Fuss!" Hilda commented acidly. "And that's all he thanks I get for always looking myself to see if his hot-water bottle was well filled and for trying to keep a little check on the household expenses when he brought down . . ." Her voice sank to a whisper . . . "Mrs. Norfolk and those two maids here."

"*As for Laurence,*" James began quickly . . .

"Yes? And what has our good John to say about Laurence?" inquired the ex-vicar of Newton Candover with gentle condescension and suave tolerance in his mellow tones.

"As for Laurence, his theatrical future under the patronage of Sir Percy Mortimer and with the help of Eleanor is no doubt secure. However, if he grows tired of playing butlers, I hope that his muse will welcome him back to Ambles as affectionately as his wife."

"Our good John is waggish. No matter, luckily I have a sense of humour," said Laurence, smiling with complacency. "Anything more about Laurence and his future, James?"

James shook his head.

"I don't think I have anything more to say, my dear

relations, except that I hope the presents you are bringing me for my birthday will come in useful as knick-knacks for your delightful house. You can now circulate as many stories about me as you like. You can even say I have founded a lunatic asylum at Ambles. I am so happy in the prospect of my marriage that I cannot feel hardly towards you all, and so I wish you good luck.

"Your affectionate brother, brother-in-law and uncle,

"John Touchwood."

"Well, marriage has changed poor John," said Edith, speaking for the first time since James had begun to read. "I wouldn't have believed he could write such a letter to *anybody*, let alone to his own family."

"Can it be," Laurence asked, "can it be that our excellent John has been indulging in the—ah—playful old custom of—ah—making April fools of his relations? I ask because a while since I discovered in my bath a miniature shoal of dead minnows together with the—ah—sepulchral monument of a somewhat burly trout."

"But, Laurence dear, John didn't put *them* in your bath," Edith exclaimed in a horrified voice.

"I am perhaps not quite such an April fool as to suppose that, my dear," Edith's husband assured her with patient kindliness. "I was merely reminded by the little incident of the date which we had all been expecting to celebrate more auspiciously this evening."

"Did you cook the minnows, uncle Laurence?" Harold asked with eager envy.

"Cook them? Certainly not, my boy," said his uncle. "Your aunt Edith extricated them with a bath-sponge."

"Did aunt Edith cook them?" Harold persisted.

"Quiet, darling, quiet," his mother urged. "We none of us feel like talking about minnows just now."

"Well, I cooked some minnows once," Harold reminded her. "And I ate them for tea. Don't you remember, mother? I gave you one, don't you remember? And you spat it out, don't you remember?"

"Oh, do keep quiet, Harold," Hilda sighed.

"Ever try boiling earthworms?" Hugh asked.

"No, uncle Hugh."

"Well, try them. They're particularly good boiled n their own mud."

"Are they, mother?" Harold asked.

"No, no, of course not. Your uncle Hugh is teasing ou."

"Very much as your brother John is teasing you, Hilda," said Hugh.

"And you," Hilda snapped. "And every one of us."

A silence fell upon the assembled company, which was roken by the entrance of Mrs. Worfolk.

"I jest came in to tell you, Mrs. Curtis, that Master Harold's bed is all ready for him."

"Oh, then we are going to be allowed to stay here over Sunday," Hilda observed bitterly.

"I'd of told you before, Mrs. Curtis," the housekeeper vent on, "only Mr. Touchwood gave me strick directions not to say anything about him being gone to America with Mrs. Touchwood."

"To America, eh?" Beatrice commented.

"Yes, Mrs. James."

"What boat did he go on?" Eleanor asked.

"On the *Murmania*, Mrs. George, and which was the hip where he met Mrs. Touchwood when he crossed over rom New York last October."

Mrs. James and Mrs. George had winced perceptibly when this relentless woman spoke of Mrs. Touchwood, nd perhaps for the first time in their lives they welcomed question from Harold.

"Mother, when uncle John comes back from America with my dear auntie Doris, will he bring my canoe?"

"Of course he will, pudding-head," said Hugh. "Your lear auntie Doris will tow it behind her across the Atlantic."

"Harold darling, run along up with Mrs. Worfolk now," his mother said. "You're tired."

Mrs. Worfolk rubbed her hand down her apron as if to take a firm grip of Harold and prevent his escaping from her.

"Can I have a piece of cake to take to bed with me, mother?" Harold asked.

"Oh, I think you've had enough, darling."

"You'd better give it to him," Hugh advised. "If you don't he'll keep you awake by gnawing the furniture."

"No, I wouldn't," said Harold sullenly. "Would I, mother?"

"Then you'd eat the soap," Hugh countered.

"I don't eat soap," said Harold.

"Well, you look as if you ate nothing else," his uncle jeered.

"I don't, do I, mother?"

"Go upstairs with Mrs. Worfolk, there's a good boy," his mother begged wearily.

The departure to bed of Harold must have helped James's digestion, for soon afterward he announced in a cheerful tone of voice that he intended to accept John's offer.

"I shan't be starting this new paper of mine until the autumn," he said, "and it will do Beyle a lot of good to have a few months in the country."

"But you know John doesn't like dogs," Hilda objected.

"What's it got to do with John? I suppose my bulldog can live in my fifth of Ambles?"

"Dear old Bill Bailey!" Beatrice sighed with warm-hearted sentiment. "*Won't* he enjoy his old self?"

"I've no doubt he will," Hilda murmured disagreeably.

"You'll be keeping Harold in your fifth of Ambles," James continued, a hint of truculence appearing in his good humour.

"I think I shall go in for pigs," Hugh proclaimed. "I take it you won't want that jolly fine range of styes for Harold, Hilda. George, will you go in for pigs with me?"

"All right," George agreed, "if you think they're profitable."

"Good old George!" Hugh declared enthusiastically. "I might give up one of my rooms in exchange for the pig-styes."

"I won't," said George. "Not unless I'm guaranteed a sitting-room of my own on the ground floor."

"Although we shall not benefit to the full extent by our excellent and waggish John's furniture," said Laurence to his wife, "I do not regret the presence of our own furniture at Ambles. In the circumstances, it's as well that we did not remove it. I shall now abandon my attempt to obtain an acting engagement before I take up my part in Sir Percy Mortimer's autumn production. Yes, I shall go back to Ambles, and begin work at once on *Peter*. Did I tell you, James, the happy little effect I have in mind with which to produce a suitably receptive mood in my—ah—audience?"

James growled at his brother-in-law rather like his own bulldog; but Laurence was not deterred.

"Yes," he continued, "I am preparing to signalize the rise of the curtain on Act One by the sound of a distant cock-crow repeated three times—ah—off-stage. I am informed that this familiar sound can be rendered with considerable verisimilitude, yet at the same time musically, by a violin."

"Or shall we go in for fowls instead of pigs, George?" Hugh asked.

"No, no," said George, "they're such fidgety brutes.

"Yes, I fancy my little effect will find a response in the extra attention the audience will devote to the . . . and that reminds me, Eleanor . . . we were talking erstwhile of the part of Sapphira . . ."

"All right, pigs then," Hugh interrupted. "And, if you ask me, Berkshires."

"But pigs don't lay eggs," Eleanor said. Then seeing that Laurence was twitching his scalp at her in surprise at her lack of attention to his play she turned to him with an apology.

"Another time, another time," he said graciously.

"We'll go into the matter together more fully down at Ambles. My canvas is so immense that one requires time to unfold it. But I thought you would all be interested to hear of my happy little effect of the cock crowing —ah—off. And talking of cock-crow we shall be hearing that matutinal warning ourselves, unless we soon hie our way homeward. Edith, don't forget that Frida knows nothing yet of her speedy return to Ambles. The little maid will be quite overjoyed."

"Couldn't we split a taxi, and you drop Jimmie and me on the way at Hill Road?" Beatrice suggested to the Halma House party.

"We'd probably split the taxi long before Hill Road, and drop you in the middle of Fitzjohn's Avenue," said George. "Taxis aren't concertinas."

"Oh, right-o," said Beatrice loftily. "Sorry I spoke."

"Some people don't know how to use taxis," George muttered to himself resentfully. "They'll pack themselves in like sardines just to . . ."

"I said I'm sorry I spoke," Beatrice repeated.

"My coccyx is still sore from the drive up," George grumbled. "In fact, I insist on driving back with Eleanor alone. Two's the proper number for a taxi."

Some of the ladies wished that Harold had not yet gone to bed, for he would have asked what a 'coccyx' was. Beatrice covered her inquisitiveness by suggesting to Laurence that she and James should share a taxi with him and Edith.

"And what about me?" Hugh asked indignantly. "I've got to get right over to West Kensington. Further than anybody."

"Hugh had better go with Laurence and Edith," said James.

The problem of fitting themselves into three taxis took some time to solve, and it did not augur well for the solution of the larger problem of fitting themselves into Ambles. It was significant, however, that in the end

Hugh managed to travel further than anybody and to spend much less.

"I believe John gave away his house just to spite me," was Hilda's somewhat egotistical decision that night, before she turned over on her side to go to sleep.

CHAPTER IV

THE FAMILY ACCEPTS

THE gift which John Touchwood had made to his relations proved to be no illusory offering of the first of April. On the very next morning the family was notified by John's solicitors that the conveyance had been duly effected with all the formality of the Law. Ambles was theirs.

Probably John himself never expected that his relations would actually go and live down at Ambles in a body. In the mood of high spirits which the prospect of his speedy marriage to Doris Hamilton set up he had made the house over to them; but at the back of his mind he had been fancying that when he and his wife came back from their honeymoon in America he should find them all more than anxious to give it back to him as a wedding present. In the first draft of the letter he dictated to Doris—her last duty as his secretary—he had not provided for the upkeep of the garden, and his offering to pay the wages of Huggins, the gardener, of Pobjoy, the second gardener and stableman, and of William the boy, had been due to the prudence of second thoughts. If Ambles was to be given back to him, he did not want to receive it as a wilderness. He knew that once his relations had to face his marriage as an accomplished fact there would be an end of their jealous plotting to thwart him of his heart's desire. He told Doris before they reached New York that he confidently expected to receive a cable from his solicitors to say that only Hilda and Harold and

possibly the Armitage family were living down there, and that Hilda was already puzzling how she was going to manage out of her small private income to run even the interior of such a large house. But John had miscalculated the effect of offering something for nothing, and by doing so he revealed perhaps one of the reasons why he had failed as a realistic novelist before he succeeded as a romantic playwright. He had forgotten that no group of his relations was likely to stand by and allow another group to benefit from his gift to the exclusion of themselves. The project of making over Ambles to a set of utterly uncongenial people had begun as a whimsy touched with malice, and it was likely to turn into a farce; but for the moment it was being taken in perfect seriousness by the victims of John's little joke.

"And confess, John dear," his wife said to him when the news that Ambles had been accepted by his relations reached them on their arrival in New York, "confess that you're just a little bit disappointed."

"Well," John replied, "it's such a jolly house."

"I think it serves you right for being so revengeful. You should just have laughed at the poor dears."

"Yes, perhaps I was rather too clever," John admitted. 'Never mind, I dare say by the time we get back to England they'll want to give it up."

"And I dare say they won't," said Doris.

Then they began to talk of the tremendous change in New York since they left it last October. John with his usual optimism hoped that they would be able to find their way about it in the course of a day or two.

"But I'm glad they haven't built over Central Park since we were here six months ago," he added.

Away in England the preliminary discussions about the partition of Ambles would hardly have been more bitterly contested if the future of Poland had been involved instead of an Elizabethan country-house in a remote corner of wooded Hampshire. Indeed, the partition might never have been settled if Hugh had not proposed to reconstruct

the house radically in order to suit the plans of the various claimants. This proposal united four-fifths of the owners against the last fifth, and by a large majority Hugh's architectural schemes were voted impracticable, for something more than a hint had transpired that Hugh expected to take out his fees in board, in spite of the fact that all the others would have at any rate some furniture of their own to add to what John had given them, whereas Hugh owned nothing in the world except a scabrous old portmanteau and a theodolite. No sooner had the accommodation been settled than the question of board became acute. Finally it was resolved that every adult should pay two pounds a week for himself and a pound a week for every child into a common fund, from which Hilda was to pay the indoor wages and keep house and table. However, when the contributions were added it was found that they amounted to a thousand pounds a year, which everybody agreed was far more than was necessary. So the adults were reduced to thirty shillings a head and the children to fifteen. Then Hilda asked what allowance was going to be made to her in return for the hard work she would be called upon to do in managing the household.

"Why, you're being paid a handsome salary already," Hugh declared.

"What salary?"

"You're only paying fifteen shillings a week for Harold, aren't you?"

"Why should I pay any more?"

"Well, seeing that Harold will eat about three pounds' worth of food, you can count that you'll be getting two pounds five shillings in pocket every week."

But Beatrice had a better way to get round Hilda than by taunting her thus. She suggested keeping house herself.

"No, no," said Hilda, "I'll do it." And to score off Beatrice for forcing her hand she pointed out that James ought to pay something a week for the board of his dog.

"I'll buy Beyle's biscuits myself, thank you," Beatrice etorted indignantly.

"But there'll always be the scraps, won't there?" Hilda ersisted.

"What, with Harold nosing around?" Hugh jeered. Poor old Beyle!"

"What James's dog eats has nothing to do with you," Hilda said.

"Hasn't it?" Hugh retorted. "If Harold eats all Beyle's dinner, the wretched dog may start on some f us. Of course, he'll probably begin on Harold, ut he may begin on one of us. What do you say, orenzo?"

Laurence flew over the stormy seas of argument like a ove.

"Live and—ah—let live, say I," he intoned.

"So do I," Hugh agreed. "That's why I'm anxious Beyle shall be properly fed. Besides, George and I shall ant some of those scraps for our pigs, shan't we, George, ld boy?"

"I note the occasion for a little joke in that connexion," aurence said with a self-congratulatory smile. "Some- hing about your Berkshires and James's Biteshire."

"Oh, Laurence, I see! It's a pun," cried Edith, allantly turning a pious conjugal searchlight on the urky silence which had succeeded her husband's little oke.

Beatrice giggled, partly because she was fundamentally ood-natured, and partly because in the gloom that aurence's joke cast upon the company Beyle's future t Ambles escaped without further notice.

And then as if in evidence of his disarmament, like an xpert at a naval conference who sacrifices a cruiser, Harold produced from his pocket the tooth with which he dentist had presented him as a souvenir of his visit st Monday.

"I'm going to put it in my museum," he announced, when I've looked at it a little with my microscope that

uncle John gave me at Christmas. Mother, what is decay made of ? "

" Hush, dear, we don't talk about things like that in public," Hilda chided.

Frida, who was also present at this colloquy, whispered something to her mother, and receiving a nod went shyly across the room to whisper something in Harold's ear.

" Dear little girl," Edith sighed fondly to Beatrice. " She wants to give him her tooth for his museum. Such adventures as that tooth has had. Laurence mistook it for one of his studs once, and popped it into his stud-box without thinking and we had such a hunt for it, didn't we Frida darling ? "

A ghostly affirmative floated from Frida's lips.

" Well, we were all children once," Beatrice divulged. " I remember I swallowed a tooth the year of the Battle of Tel-el-Kebir, and it quite upset my poor old mother." Then with a swoop she alighted on the present again. " Well, all I hope is that Eleanor won't come back from rehearsal on the rampage and start altering everything just as we've settled the house so nicely."

George was the sole representative of the interest of his family, for, unlike their cousins, Bertram and Viola had taken no part in these preliminary debates about a communal life at Ambles. Bertram and Viola were both at school. They had, of course, heard of the change in prospect for them ; but until their spirits were released from purgatory by the Easter holidays they were in no state to discuss anything except an ultimate revenge upon their cousin Harold for being free now while they were kept in chains.

In a class-room of Mr. Hackett's small preparatory school for the sons of gentlemen Bertram was gazing out of the window at what this morning was the unusually dull traffic of Penywern Road, Earl's Court. At last an errand boy went by along the pavement opposite. He was whistling some tune of the moment, and as it floated in at the window with the soft April air Bertram, darkling

ere and there with ink-stains, listened. He was seized vith a languorous desire to fade away upon this errand-oy's liquid notes into the Hampshire woodland dim, to lissolve and quite forget the weariness here where boys at and heard each other groan. With his pen he began o tap upon the desk a xylophonic echo of that errand-oy's full-throated ease. A tap on his own head with a uler reminded him that the class was involved with he disgusting contortions into which the reduplicated erfects of certain Latin verbs flung themselves.

"Conjugate *parco*, Touchwood."

Bertram rose in his place.

"*Parco*, I spare. *Parcere*, to spare."

Then he hesitated. The crisis of this vile verb was t hand.

"Go on! What's the perfect?"

Bertram scowled in ignorance. The boy next to him vas waving his arm like an eager octopus.

"Please, sir, I know, sir. Please, sir!"

Another tentacle waved. Tentacles were waving all down the row.

"Come along, Touchwood. We don't want to be kept waiting all the morning for your answer."

The tentacles waved more wildly than ever, and here and there a sycophant tittered.

"Next boy," the master snapped out.

"Please, sir, *peperci*, I have spared, sir."

"Right! Past participle, Touchwood?"

Bertram's brow was knotted like the brow of a philo-opher prying into the unfathomable depths of the universe. How to extract from such a hideously unnatural perfect a recognizable past participle?

"*Peperci*, I have spared," he groaned, dreaming the while of revenge upon several of the better informed among his school-fellows.

"Next boy but one!" the master demanded, passing by the boy who had supplied the perfect and on whose lips knowledge of the participle was now frothing.

The next boy but one was Higginbotham, and Higginbotham was Bertram's great friend. He was a stolid, moon-faced boy with only one accomplishment, which was a deadly flick at marbles. Higginbotham was dreaming of next summer term when marbles would displace tops and when he would add day by day to his collection of huge fourpenny Indians which he kept in a canvas bag and fingered all through the winter as a miser his gold. Higginbotham had no more notion of the past participle than Bertram; but had he known it he would have scorned to take advantage of his comrade. He stared at the master with less expression than one of his own marbles. His neighbour, however, supplied the missing participle.

"Sir, *parcitum* or *parsum*, sir," he proclaimed with inward gurgitations brought about by the intense excitement of temporarily repressed knowledge.

"Take two marks, Cumberbatch," said the master; but Cumberbatch took three, for he sat down on a drawing-pin that Higginbotham had placed on the seat of his desk.

"Touchwood," the master continued, "write me out the conjugation of the verb *parco* twenty times by to-morrow morning."

"But, sir!"

Bertram was staggered by the brutality of a verb which inflicted on him a reduplicated perfect and two irregular participles. "But, sir," he protested, "sir, I was just going to say that."

"I'm afraid just going to never goes," observed the master, smiling complacently when his observation was rewarded with the titters of the sycophants.

"Sucking up!" Bertram meditated scornfully. And then his thoughts turned again to the radiant freedom of his cousin Harold in this pleasant April weather. Life was not just. His mood was as black as his inky fingers. Even the sight of an old lady opposite trying to unwind her dachshund from a lamp-post failed to cheer him. He heard without regret the master's command to change

seats with one of the sycophants on the other side of the class-room. Nothing mattered now but the Easter holidays and revenge.

In a class-room of Miss Jamieson's select school for young ladies Viola was gazing out of the window at the film of green upon the privet-bushes and the still leafless boughs of the trees in Pembroke Square, Earl's Court. She was thinking of the way Frida had whispered something to her mother that morning at breakfast in Halma House and of the way aunt Edith had murmured that Viola had to go to school and would not be able to. Able to do what? Able to do nothing so long as she was kept a prisoner in this horrible school.

"Name the principal rivers of France, Viola," sniffed Miss Fanshawe, the junior mistress.

Several little girls wriggled about in their seats as if they contained within them the principal rivers of France, or, not being allowed by Miss Jamieson's genteel rules to wave their arms as a sign of knowledge, they were almost bursting with the Seine, the Loire, the Rhône, the Saône and the Garonne.

Viola tried to remember what country their geography lesson had reached this morning. It seemed to her that when she was last conscious of what was going on in the class Russia had been the topic. So she began:

"The principal rivers are the Volga, the . . ."

The class emitted a half-stifled gasp of horrified superiority. Miss Fanshawe showed the whites of her eyes. A large red cross was inscribed against Viola's name. Miss Fanshawe blew her nose and delivered judgment.

"You will lose five marks for inattention, Viola Touchwood. You will receive a red cross for gross impertinence. And you will bring me to-morrow morning an outline map of France with the rivers clearly shown in ink."

Viola sat down in her place and tossed her dark curly hair at Miss Fanshawe as a gypsy convicted of stealing eggs might express her opinion of the magistrate.

"*And*," Miss Fanshawe added with a stern sniff, "you will be kept in for half an hour after morning school for insubordination."

Through a swirling mist of angry thoughts Viola saw her cousins Harold and Frida gambolling like lambs in an April meadow. Life was one long injustice.

That afternoon when she and Bertram stood for a moment in brief communion by the pillar-box at the corner before he turned southward to Penywern Road she northward to Pembroke Square, she told him that she actually regretted Miss Coldwell, their late governess.

"I think school's too damnable for words," she declared fiercely.

"So do I," Bertram agreed.

"Never mind," said Viola, "the Easter hols. aren't more than a few days off now."

"And then we're going down to Ambles," Bertram reminded her, "which is most frightful sucks for a chap in my class called Cumberbatch, because he's going away into the country and he thought I wasn't."

"It's a dirty shame greasy Harold doesn't have to go to school," Viola murmured darkly.

"It is rather stinking," her brother agreed. "But never mind, the Easter hols. will be here in one hundred and forty-four hours counting from four o'clock this afternoon."

"And for some of them we'll be asleep," Viola added encouragingly.

"I bet Harold won't be so glad as we are when the Easter hols. begin," Bertram said, a stormy light dancing in his blue eyes.

"I bet he won't, too," she nodded, her dark eyes brooding.

And the parting look they gave one another was such a look as two blood-thirsty Catholics might have exchanged one hundred and forty-four hours before the Eve of St Bartholomew.

"I'll think out some good ways of . . ." he stopped

There was no need for him to continue. His sister's imagination was rapid.

"And if Frida doesn't come on our side . . ." she added.

"I say, you ass, we'll be late," Bertram exclaimed suddenly. He swung his satchel round his head as if he were slinging a fatal stone at the Goliath school, and then with an exultant whoop he dashed off up Earl's Court Road at full speed.

As for Viola, by the way she went tripping down Earl's Court Road she might have been on her way to a maypole instead of to school.

In the end the children were exquisitely rewarded for the weariness of the Lent term by travelling down unescorted to Hampshire on the morning of the Wednesday in Holy Week. Their father had preceded them, partly because he had grown tired of Mrs. Easton's harping upon the ruin of the stuffed trout, partly because Laurence proposed to stay in London over Easter by himself, partly because he wanted to avoid any contact with heavy luggage, and partly because a quantity of cyclists had arrived to spend a fortnight in visiting London and its environs, which meant that so many bicycles were now stabled in his room at Halma House as to make it as uncomfortable as the inside of Big Ben. Eleanor was rehearsing hard for a play to be produced on Easter Monday, so she had to forgo any idea of visiting Ambles for the present. Thus it was that the morning of the twelfth of April found her on the platform of Waterloo Station giving a few last motherly exhortations to Viola.

"Now don't forget, Vikins, above everything I want you to practise your dancing."

"Well, I will," Viola promised, her glance wandering after her brother, who had just climbed to the top of their immense pile of luggage to gaze through a shilling telescope for a sight of their train backing into the station. Not otherwise might a Swiss hunter upon an Alpine peak sweep the field of vision for chamois.

"Especially your new Spanish dances," Eleanor

continued. And she began to hum some fierce feverish Andalusian melody to inspire the ambition of her daughter.

Viola scowled.

"People are staring, mother," she expostulated.

"Silly self-conscious little puss!"

And then to her daughter's disgust Eleanor began to mark the beat upon her handbag as though it were a tambourine.

"Mother!" Viola begged in a torment of filial shame. "That porter thought you were wanting him."

It was true that a porter wheeling along a loaded barrow with one hand, a perambulator with the other, had definitely turned round to stare at Eleanor's outline of a fandango. However, he paid for his curiosity a moment later, when his barrow caught the edge of the pile of luggage, from the summit of which Bertram was looking out for the Wrottesford train, for the whole structure instantly disintegrated, much of it, including Bertram himself, on top of the porter who in an effort to save the contents of his barrow propelled the perambulator rapidly along the platform into the back of a conveniently placed buffer.

"Well, it isn't our perambulator," said Eleanor indignantly when she heard the buffer's language. "Get up at once, Bertram," she went on angrily.

Bertram had instinctively sought to mitigate any blame that might be cast on him for the collapse by suggesting that he had been severely injured in the course of it. However, the arrival of the Wrottesford train cured the last vestige of a limp. Five minutes later, he and Viola, free for at least two hours and a half from adult interference were grinning at one another from two corners of a third-class compartment.

"Did you see the way mother was dancing about on the platform?" Viola asked him.

"No, was she? How beastly!"

"Beastly!" Viola echoed. "That was why the porter bumped into the luggage."

Bertram shook his head censoriously.

" She never minds making a most frightful ass of herself nywhere. I hope when you go on the stage you won't tart making a frightful ass of yourself everywhere."

" No, I'm going to be as cold as ice," Viola asseverated. One of the girls at my school showed me a book about an ctress who was as cold as ice, and she sounded rather ecent."

Her brother nodded sagely.

" Still, I don't much care for books with women in them t all," he said. " I think they always spoil a book."

" I wouldn't spoil a book if I was in it, would I, Bertram ? " she pressed.

He regarded her critically.

" Well, perhaps not so much as all women. Have some ineapple noyau ? "

He bored down into his pocket and dragged to the urface a small yellowish slab of the variety of marchpane nown as noyau, because it contains pieces of almond. This he divided almost equally, and if he kept for himself he larger portion he allowed his sister to retain a jagged nd of rice-paper which properly belonged to his own piece. He knew how much Viola enjoyed this rice-paper ; and, s he watched her snap it off with her sharp little teeth nd hold it upon her tongue, there to melt into a rarified aste, he was pleasurably aware of having given her a pecial treat at his own expense, for he too enjoyed this aper and could strip a plateful of macaroons of it in next o no time. They devoured the noyau slowly and turned he fragments over in their mouths in silent relish until he richly flavoured twopenny-worth was but a pineapple-erfumed memory.

" It's hard cheese that noyau costs such a beastly lot," Bertram sighed. " I've never been able to buy a piece f raspberry noyau and a piece of pineapple noyau and a iece of apricot noyau at the same time. And it's jolly ard to choose which you like best. I rather wish now 'd got raspberry this time. Phew ! I'll be glad when 'm grown up."

"You'll be able to buy nougat then as well."

"A chap in my class called Worthington once had a sixpenny box of nougat," he sighed more deeply than before.

The thought of Worthington's fortune was beyond commentary. They gazed dreamily out of the window at clouds of nougat floating across the April sky. Then dismissing the unattainable with the resiliency of youth they fetched their souls back from the *au delà* and gazed earnestly at the other occupants of the carriage. An old lady in another corner looked up from fumbling in a string bag to beam at them, whereupon Bertram and Viola immediately stared with intense concentration at the space of dusty floor between their feet, leaning over further and further to conceal their suppressed mirth until their heads met, whereupon they gave up and laughed aloud ungovernably.

"You ass, what are you laughing at?" Bertram inquired when they had re-established control of themselves.

This set Viola off laughing again, and of course Bertram himself.

"Enjoying yourselves?" asked the kindly old lady in the corner. "That's right."

This nearly sent them into hysterics, and indeed in one spasm of mirth Bertram did slip right off the seat on to the floor, which of course allowed Viola to laugh with specious cause for laughter. Wimbledon had been left behind before they were able to lean back in their places and look at each other in the face without going off into fresh peals of laughter.

"You ass, what were you laughing at?" Bertram panted.

"Nothing," Viola revealed.

"Nor was I," her brother confessed.

Fortunately the dear old lady in the corner alighted at Surbiton, or by the time Wrottesford was reached Bertram and Viola would have had to be carried out

he train, exhausted. Her place was taken by a young woman wearing a veil which she kept working at with her mouth, the only mobile feature in an otherwise shiny wooden face. Sometimes she would succeed in keeping the veil in her mouth for a moment, and the struggles of her mouth to hold the veil were watched by the two children with as much absorption as the struggles of a fly in a spider's web. At Weybridge a woman with beady eyes and a beady bonnet got in and spent the time between there and Woking in darting suspicious glances every minute or two at the rack above her head as if things were dropping down on her. This was most interesting to watch, especially when the suspicious woman occasionally threw her whole body round to peer up and nearly swept his paper out of the hands of a stout man next her. At Woking the wooden-faced woman, the beady-eyed woman, the stout man, and two nondescript passengers all got out. Bertram and Viola were just exchanging happy looks of congratulation when a harassed woman with a baby and four other children got in. They glowered at the intruders, particularly when the harassed woman in order to pacify the baby invited it to see the little girl's pretty curls.

"What frightful cheek!" Bertram muttered to his sister, who frowned haughtily at the baby, whereupon the baby said, "Blah! blah!" clutched at Viola's curls, missed, began to yell, decided to be sick instead, and then sucked a dummy teat with uncouth noises, the while her brothers and sisters simpered at one another and seemed to think that Bertram and Viola should be gratified by the entertainment their baby was offering its fellow-travellers.

When they passed Brookwood Bertram leaned across to his sister and warned her that, not being able to stand these beastly kids any longer, he proposed to exchange their compartment for a smoker on reaching Aldershot.

"Only mind you hurry, V, because we won't have much time."

So the moment the train drew into Aldershot they

leapt out of the carriage like two detected pickpockets and dashed wildly along the train in search of a smoking compartment.

"Here you are, you cuckoo," Bertram yelled, diving head downward for a door and beating back by the fury of his onset three dragoons and the corporal of a Line regiment who were on their way out. In his excitement Bertram failed to notice whether the dragoons were dragoon-guards or dragoons, let alone their actual regiment. This threw him into a gloom, for he collected in competition with his friend Higginbotham regiments of the British Army, and Higginbotham was at present three regiments up.

"Good lummy, I *was* a frightful ass," he groaned.

"Well, never mind, perhaps you've already got those regiments."

But he was not to be consoled by possibilities.

"And Higginbotham's going to Southsea these hols.," he went on miserably. "He'll probably collect a frightful lot there. I *was* a beastly ass."

"Well, what dragoons have you got already?"

"None," Bertram groaned. "I've been waiting for a frightful time to see a dragoon *or* a dragoon-guard, and now when I do see them I miss them. And Higginbotham got a Scots Grey in Kensington Gardens last term," he concluded on a note of utter despair.

Viola became feminine.

"Well, if I was you, I'd say they were whatever regiments you haven't got and count them in your collection."

"But that would be cheating," said her brother contemptuously. "Higginbotham's frightfully fair. Once he thought some Army Service Corps chaps were Seventeenth Lancers, but when he was wrong he wouldn't count either."

"Well, I think it's a silly game," Viola declared.

"It's a jolly good game if you don't cheat like a girl," he retorted.

"I expect your wonderful Higginbotham will cheat at Southend," she said with a touch of bitterness.

"He won't cheat. And he isn't going to Southend, you ass. He's going to Southsea."

"Well, he'll cheat there."

"Look here, V, you'll make me waxy in half a jiffy."

"Well, you shouldn't spoil our first long journey alone together by thinking about Higginbotham all the time."

"You needn't be so shirty about Higginbotham, because as a matter of fact after he saw you that afternoon in the Square he said he wouldn't mind being gone on you."

"I don't want anybody to be gone on me," Viola snapped. Yet it was a distinctly gentle snap, so gentle indeed that, had the moon-faced Higginbotham appeared at that moment, she might even have shocked her brother by an excess of coyness.

"Well, don't wriggle your shoulders like that," he advised sternly. "There's nothing to be cocky about."

"I'm not wriggling."

"Yes, you are. You're wriggling like a worm."

This was too much. Viola hit first; but it was an unequal struggle. Age and sex told in Bertram's favour. She had to cry 'pax,' which her brother granted, so magnanimously indeed as to include with it two jujubes flavoured, he alleged, with honey.

"But you've only got two left," she murmured tenderly.

"Well, I don't want any, because I'm going to smoke now," and as if it were a mere piece of noyau, he produced from a pocket one of his father's largest pipes.

"Bertram!" she gasped.

"That's why I wanted to get into an empty smoker," he explained.

"But, Bertram, have you got any tobacco?"

"I've got some twist," he told her with simple pride, and dangled it before her eyes.

"Oo, you swizzler!" she cried. "That's licorice!"

"Licorice! Suck it, you ass, if you think it's licorice."

There was in Bertram's accents an indignation which his sister recognized as based upon outraged truth. She was no longer incredulous. Rather she watched him

lovingly while he scraped away at the twist with his Norwegian knife.

"But father doesn't cut his tobacco like that," she commented.

"Father! Good lummy, this isn't father's tobacco. This is sailor's tobacco."

"How did you get it?"

"Henderson's brother gave it to him, and I swapped something for it."

"What did you swap?"

Bertram looked a little guilty.

"Well, you remember when we went to the Zoo and the giraffe licked my hand?"

"Yes."

"Well, you remember the next time it suddenly galloped away like mad?"

"Yes."

"Well," said Bertram, mustering some bravado for the confession, "I pulled some hairs out of his neck, and I swapped them with Henderson, because he wants to look at them with his microscope."

"Oh, Bertram, why were you so cruel?"

"That's not cruel."

"It is cruel!" she vowed with a stamp of her foot.

"Oh, all right, it is cruel then. But shut up, because I've told you now."

She accepted this as the easing of a guilty conscience, and woman-like she forgave him.

It took Bertram about ten minutes to fill that pipe, and by the time the task was accomplished the train was running into Bentley, where two rustic labourers got into the carriage.

"I dare you to light it now," Viola muttered under her breath maliciously.

But her brother was not prepared to accept the challenge. He dreaded to appear as a novice in the presence of these two labourers, who were puffing away with such accomplishment. And it was as well that Bertram was prudent,

for when he and Viola were alone again in the carriage and he tried to light up, nothing happened except the kind of noise that a maiden lady makes to her pet canary.

"What's it squeaking like that for?" Viola asked.

"It must be stopped up or something," he replied, examining the bowl with a frown.

"You stopped it up on purpose because you're funky you'll be sick," she jeered.

Bertram disregarded her taunts, and after emptying the pipe filled it again less tightly. This time by dint of puffing so rapidly that he hardly had a chance to breathe he did manage to eject two or three attenuated wisps of smoke from his mouth; but the contents of his matchbox were exhausted long before he managed even to be able to pretend that the pipe was alight.

"I think a pipe is rather a beastly fag," he admitted at last. "I vote we look out of the window. The country gets awfully decent from now on."

The pipe was put away until he could bag enough matches from the store-cupboard at Ambles to break it in; and the two children gazed out of the window at the country they loved.

"It's beastly only having three weeks at Easter," Bertram sighed.

"Beastly," his sister echoed.

CHAPTER V

THE PERFECT DAY

IT was noon when the train pulled up at Wrottesford, bringing to the pleasant little station a smell of London which was soon chased away by the freshness of the country air. The children, who had had nothing to eat since breakfast except a slab of pineapple noyau, two honey-flavoured jujubes, four gelatine lozenges, and a miniature barber's pole of peppermint rock, were feeling peckish. In fact, for the last ten miles of Hampshire woodland through which the train had been puffing in leisurely progress, the conversation had been entirely devoted to the theme of how best to expend at the Wrottesford sweetshop the three-halfpence of Bertram's capital and the halfpenny of Viola's. The final decision was to invest the whole amount in the purchase of two ounces of mixed gums.

On the platform they were not unpleasantly surprised to see their uncle Hugh, who in breeches and boxcloth leggings appeared like a herald of rural delights.

"Well, you kids, I drove in to meet you," he announced.

"Thanks awfully, uncle Hugh," said Bertram.

"Thanks awfully, uncle Hugh," said Viola.

"Where's your luggage? Will you want a porter?"

"Well, I think so," said Bertram.

"All right, tootle along to the van and pick out what's yours. Then we'll call for it with the dog-cart after I've attended to some business in Wrottesford."

Bertram looked first at his uncle and then at the alp o

ggage which was rising from the after end of the platform.

"What are you staring at?" his uncle asked.

"Well, I wasn't staring," Bertram explained politely. I was thinking."

"What about?"

"I was thinking that perhaps some of the luggage ouldn't fit into the dog-cart, uncle Hugh. Will you ome and look?"

They walked along the platform until they came to the oble pile round which the staff of Wrottesford station as gathered in silent awe.

"Hurry up and pick out your pieces," Hugh told his ephew.

"I think they're all ours," he replied with a blush, for ke most boys he was acutely sensitive over the criticism iat his parents might rouse by their excesses.

"Why didn't you bring Halma House itself with you hile you were about it? It wouldn't have taken up uch more room. Bit of luggage here, porter, eh?"

"Yes, sir," the porter agreed, lifting his cap and cratching the back of his head. The train had puffed n by now, and in the empty station the pile of luggage ppeared larger than ever.

"Some of these here baskets, sir, be powerful heavy," the orter continued, indicating the receptacles of Eleanor's eatrical wardrobe, across every one of which ELEANOR ARTWRIGHT was printed in bold black letters.

"I can't think why your mother didn't pack both you ids in one of her baskets while she was at it," Hugh emarked as seriously as if he had really meant it.

But the two kids spotted a joke and smiled dutifully. hey were not prepared to defend their mother's baggage.

"Well, the only thing to do is to send in one of the agons from Four Lanes Farm for this load," Hugh ecided.

"Yes, sir, I dare say that would be best."

"And perhaps you'll be able to keep an eye on the uff till the wagon gets in?"

"Yes, sir," the porter assented with what may or may not have been irony. "I expect I'll be able to do that all right."

"It's a good thing trains don't shy," said Hugh. "The next engine-driver who comes into Wrottesford will think he's in Switzerland."

An expression of horror suddenly curdled the strawberries and cream of Bertram's complexion.

"Good lummy!" he ejaculated.

"What's the matter now?"

"I've left my fireman's helmet on the rack of the railway carriage!"

His sister clasped her hands in sympathetic dismay.

"Oh, Bertram, you haven't?"

"Yes, I did," he muttered hopelessly, "when we scooted along the train into that smoker."

"But what do you want a fireman's helmet for?" his uncle asked. "I dare say they'll feel like making a bonfire of this luggage before long, but I don't suppose they will. You're not going to set light to it, are you, porter?"

The porter grinned.

"No, sir, I don't suppose I'll do that."

"Well, it was the fireman's helmet that uncle John gave me at Christmas," Bertram explained miserably. He was seeing it in fancy on the head of one of those detestable kids in the train. He was imagining it being used for a game of 'peep-bo' with that objectionable baby.

"And we were going to play Greeks and Trojans," Viola added. "I was going to be Pallas Athene, and Bertram was going to be Achilles, and Harold was going to be the dead body of Hector and be dragged along by the chariot, which was going to be the wheelbarrow round the walls of Troy, which were going to be the wall of the kitchen-garden at Ambles."

"And we were going to play Early Britons too," Bertram reminded her. "And the Reckitt's Blue the cook at Halma House donnayed me is inside the helmet."

"What do you want Reckitt's Blue for?" Hugh asked.

"For woad, of course, you silly," his niece told him.

"We were going to blue ourselves all over," Bertram xplained. "And then we were going to let Harold wear ıy fireman's helmet."

"Yes," Viola went on eagerly, "because he was going ɔ be a Roman Legion, and we were going to massacre him."

"Well, look here, with that cast I'll help in this pro- uction," their uncle volunteered heartily. "I'll buy ou all the Reckitt's Blue you want."

"Yes, but Harold won't be a Roman unless he has my elmet," Bertram pointed out. "He always thinks ve're going to do something to him. He's such a frightful unk."

"Oh, we must get this helmet back," Hugh declared. Come along to the lost property office, and let's see what an be done about it."

The rescue of the helmet having been provided for, Hugh led the way out of the station.

"The dog-cart's down at the Blue Dragon," he told hem. "I've got to see a farmer there about some pigs. Your father and I are going in for breeding Berkshire pigs."

Bertram and Viola were silent. They were scouring heir minds for dramas of history in which pigs had played prominent part.

"What colour are Berkshire pigs, uncle Hugh?" Bertram asked presently.

"Black."

"So they *could* be elephants, V," he observed to his ster.

She nodded gravely; and, as they walked along toward Wrottesford High Street, her spirit roamed with her rother's through the great equatorial jungle that urrounded the demesne of Ambles.

"And Harold can be a native bearer," Bertram pro- laimed without bothering to say in what African drama. And I'll be Stanley."

"And what can I be?" Viola asked, hoping against ope for the answer her heart desired.

"Well, you can be Doctor Livingstone," her brother said. "Only don't be too cocky about it," he added quickly when Doctor Livingstone began to dance about in the road for joy.

The snuggery of the Blue Dragon greatly appealed to the imagination of the children. This atmosphere of ale and sawdust was such as bold Dick Turpin had breathed. Bertram became so ambitious of manhood's privilege that he felt called upon to anticipate one of them by spitting solemnly and most accurately into the centres of three of the bright spittoons upon the sanded floor, his sister eyeing him as fondly as Black-Eyed Susan might have eyed her Sweet William.

"Farmer Pocock not here yet?" Hugh inquired of Mrs. Pringle, the landlady, a woman whose curves had an Atlantic majesty and whose coiffure was woven and shaped like a bee-skep.

"He's not come in yet, Mr. Touchwood."

"Then give me a pint of bitter, please."

Viola watched Mrs. Pringle grip the porcelain handle of the lever and draw a tankard of ale with nearly as fine a head on it as her own. Then she murmured to her brother:

"You're not still going to be a signalman, are you, Bertram?"

"No. Why?"

"Because if you were I think I'd like to have a public-house," she told him. "It must be awfully ripping to draw bitter."

"Well, I wouldn't mind having a public-house," Bertram admitted. "They smell rather ripping, I think."

The children inhaled for a moment or two the alcoholic ozone, and presently Viola asked her brother if he could smell cheese. He thought he could, and pickles too."

"I didn't know you were married, Mr. Touchwood," Mrs. Pringle observed.

"I'm not. These are my brother's kids."

Mrs. Pringle beamed at them over the counter.

"And what would you like, my dears?" she inquired.

"A pint of bitter," said Bertram.

"A pint of bitter," said Viola.

Even Hugh's nonchalance was shaken for a moment.

"Here, hadn't you better have lemonade?" he almost pleaded.

"Lemon and dash," the hostess decided. "That wouldn't hurt them, not if they was to regular swim in it, as they say."

As soon as the children saw Mrs. Pringle fill up the prosaic lemonade of ordinary life with liquid from that magical fountain, their gratification expressed itself in such a broad grin that in a moment they won the freedom of the Blue Dragon for so long as Mrs. Pringle should remain its hostess.

"And I know what you *would* like," she went on, turning to the shelves behind her and taking down a tin. "You'd like some mixed biscuits."

They grinned again. Among the major pleasures of life on this planet were meditation upon the contents of a tin of mixed biscuits, the careful choice of the ones they thought they would enjoy most, and the slow crunching of the ones they had chosen.

"Help yourselves," Mrs. Pringle urged. "And don't spare the tin. There's plenty more where those came from."

Nor would that excellent woman allow Hugh to pay even for the two lemons and dashes.

"Thank you, Mr. Touchwood, I don't invite customers to refresh theirselves and then charge 'em for it. And what's more, nor did Mr. Pringle." She sighed. "There was a man, Mr. Touchwood. Generous? Well, he really didn't know the meaning of stint. But the best men don't always live the longest. No, indeed. It's four years ago come next Whit Monday as he went off in a appleplexy. Two loud snorts, as you might say, and he was gone. He was buried in the churchyard of the parish church in Whit Week, and there wasn't a publican within twenty miles who didn't come to the funeral. There

wasn't a dry eye in the churchyard, and there wasn't a dry mouth in this very snuggery where you're standing. I knew that was how Mr. Pringle would have wanted for it to be. I wish you'd met him, Mr. Touchwood. You'd have been bound to like him. Well, he was a man who was universally liked, as they say. And only just fifty-four when he was took. But he was a big man. That's where the appleplexy got him. Well, you can see for yourself."

She pointed to a life-size photograph of the deceased host, the genial rotundity of whose head and shoulders still presided over the snuggery of the Blue Dragon.

"It took ten of them to carry him out," Mrs. Pringle related proudly.

The children gazed reverently up at the portrait of the man, the example of whose life they felt was responsible for the mixed biscuits they were now crunching and the nectar they were sipping.

"Like your lemon and dash, loveys?" Mrs. Pringle asked.

"Awfully decent," said Bertram.

"Awfully decent," said Viola.

"Don't spare the biscuits," she exhorted.

Yes, that was the way to conjugate the verb *parcere*, thought Bertram, the shadow of that remembered imposition flickering across his face like the brief shadow of an April cloud. But the sun was out again in a moment.

"We're going to be here for the whole of the Easter holidays," he informed his hostess.

"Well, if I had the management of the world, it would be holidays all the year round," Mrs. Pringle declared.

"So would I," Bertram agreed warmly.

"So would I," declared Viola.

"Well, when the three wise men of Gotham agree, the world goes round twice as fast, they say," the hostess averred. "Is your pa down here?"

"Yes, he's going to live in uncle John's house."

"At Ambles, is he? Very nice too. I don't get about

now as much as I did. I'm growing a bit too bulky. But I remember passing the remark to Mr. Pringle when we drove by in the victorier one Sunday, and which we always used to do of a fine Sunday, I remember passing the remark what a fine old house it was. And is your ma there now ? "

" Not yet," said Viola. " She's acting in London."

" Oh, your ma's an actress, is she ? Very nice too. They get about a lot. I remember when I was a girl I had a strong notion to go on the stage myself ; but my father was a very nervous man, and the idea of me going on the stage made him twitch all over and come out in a regular bath of perspiration. So I gave up the idea, and went into business instead."

" I'm going to be an actress," Viola told her.

" Oh, you are, are you ? And what are you going to act ? "

" Oh, tragedy and comedy and most things, I expect."

" Very nice too. Well, my own favourite plays are *East Lynne* and *Charley's Aunt*. So you've hit my taste right away, and which *is* tragedy and comedy. And what's your name ? "

" Viola."

" Violet, eh ? "

" No, Violah."

" Oh, Violah. I don't believe I ever heard that name before. Bit of Spanish onion about that name, isn't there ? "

" It's in Shakespeare," Bertram explained.

" In Shakespeare, is it ? Wasn't he the feller who wrote *Hamlet ?* Oh, what a melancholy affair that was ! Everybody dying off like flies in October. I hope your name isn't Hamlet ? "

" No, it's Bertram."

" Well, that's another new one to me. Is that out of Shakespeare too ? "

" No, it's just a name."

" Well, Bertram and Violah, if you like the theatre

and if you want to have a good shiver, there's a company acting in the parish hall, beginning Easter Monday with *Maria Marten in the Red Barn*, and if you slip in here round about two o'clock we'll pop off together and go to see the matinée. It'll freshen me up for the evening to see a good murder in the afternoon. And it's a really good piece, though of course it's not laughable like *Charley's Aunt*. William Corder was the name of the feller that did the poor girl in, and a good name it was for the dirty rogue, because he put the cord round his own neck, as you might say."

"Can we really come with you, Mrs. Pringle?" Viola asked wide-eyed.

"Of course you can, duckie. And more than welcome. They talk about these fillums, but give me good flesh and blood when I go to the theatre. Well, it's more natural."

The children could only gulp their sense of the overwhelming decency of Mrs. Pringle's invitation; and just then their uncle, who had been out looking for Farmer Pocock, came back with a burly man, whose fresh complexion, big fair moustache, and square felt hat belonged to a typical yeoman.

"Well, look here, Mr. Touchwood," he was saying. "I'd better drive you over to my farm right away now. Then we can have a snack together and see the pigs without being that much hurried."

"But I've got my nephew and my niece with me," said Hugh dubiously. "I think I'd better deposit them at home first."

"Not at all," Farmer Pocock burred hospitably. "Bring 'em along. My wife will be glad to see 'em, that's a sure thing."

Highrood Farm lay four miles in the other direction from Ambles; and by the time they reached it after an uphill drive in Farmer Pocock's trap through winding lanes, whose hazel-hedges were misted with pale green and whose banks were starred with primroses, the time was close upon half-past one. The farmer's wife was no

t all put out at having to provide a meal for three extra nouths so late, and by two o'clock they were all sitting lown to a meal spread in the old farm parlour. This ong low room faintly perfumed with lavender and apples ooked out on a little garden ablow with daffodils, and eyond across a rolling pasture to beechen slopes and ak woods. Sheep were lying about in the foreground, hewing away with an expression of the most fatuous omplacency. Smutty-nosed lambs were kicking their egs in the air, and butting one another. Birdsong fluted hrough the open window; bird shadows kept blinking cross the panes. The dimity curtains stirred in the entle breeze. Bertram and Viola were tucking into ried eggs and bacon with the prospect of unlimited trawberry jam and cream to follow. It was the very eak of Spring.

After dinner, while Hugh went off with Farmer Pocock o discuss Berkshire pigs, the two children explored the arm-yard. Bertram wondered if the manure-heap in the niddle was as soft as it looked, and after testing it with ne leg found that it was considerably softer; but by learly pulling Viola head-foremost into the middle of it e managed not to plunge his own leg deeper than the nee. Any unpleasant dampness was soon disposed of y climbing up to the top of a great heap of straw in one f the barns and leaping down, time after time, upon a esser heap of straw below. In the course of this game Viola burst two buttons on which much depended and ad to seek the help of Mrs. Pocock, who was not content vith safety-pins, but insisted upon sewing on two fresh uttons. Viola had no sooner shaken her petticoats with sense that all was secure beneath than Bertram came in vith a richly bleeding finger caused by his investigation of he way a chaff-cutter worked.

"Goodness gracious!" kind Mrs. Pocock exclaimed vhile she was bandaging him up. "You might have liced your finger right off."

"Yes," he agreed. "And I thought I had at first."

But the culmination of an afternoon crowded with incident was Bertram's descent of the farm well, which was over a hundred and fifty feet deep. One of the farm hands had previously gone down on the bucket in order to grapple for the body of a young pig which had fallen into the well that morning during an attack of hysterics. It was sad the children had missed the accident; but even that hardly clouded the glory of Bertram's descent and his triumphant return above ground with a large lump of damp chalk still adhering to the toe of his boot.

"My gosh," he said, when this precious piece of evidence was affectionately removed in order to be wrapped up and taken home as a souvenir, "I was in a frightful funk it wouldn't stay on. I didn't dare move my leg all the way up."

"Was it very cold?" Viola inquired with tender envy.

"Stinkingly cold," he assured her.

"Was there any ice floating about?"

Reluctantly he admitted that he had not seen any ice.

And though Viola did not enjoy the pleasure of that descent herself, she was at least able to prod the body of the drowned piglet, which was a minor consolation.

By now the afternoon was well advanced. Yet when Hugh, primed with statistics about the breeding of Berkshire pigs, suggested the advisableness of getting back to Wrottesford, Mrs. Pocock declared that after their miserable dinner, which was all she had been able to prepare for them at such short notice, they really must stay and eat a proper tea. And it *was* a proper tea. Sardines. Tongue. Boiled eggs. Rock cakes with twice as many currants as any rock cakes ever held before. Plum cake. New bread. Unlimited butter. Unlimited strawberry jam. Bottled cherries. Unlimited cream. Nobody to frown at one for helping oneself too lavishly, but on the contrary a beaming persuasion to eat more and still more.

It was seven o'clock when a moon nearly as full as Bertram and Viola climbed above the wooded slopes and suggested to Hugh that they really must be going back.

So Farmer Pocock went off to see about getting the trap round and Mrs. Pocock went off to find one basket in which the children could store their own souvenirs of the afternoon and another in which to store their souvenirs of her hospitable self.

"Well," said Bertram, with as much enthusiasm as his replete condition would allow, "I think Mrs. Pocock and Mrs. Pringle are the two most spiffing people I ever knew."

"You wouldn't mind reading about *them* in a book," his sister suggested.

"Well, of course not, you ass; but women in books aren't ever like that."

"Well, they could be if people wrote proper books," she argued.

"And I think uncle Hugh's awfully decent too," Bertram continued in case Viola should get too cocky over her own sex.

"Awfully decent. I wonder why father told mother he was lucky to have been kept out of prison."

"Well, I'm glad he did keep out. But if he gets into prison now, we'll try to rescue him."

Their uncle came back into the room just then with the news that the trap was waiting. They regarded him affectionately.

"We've had a fizzing time at Highrood Farm, uncle Hugh," said Bertram.

"Fizzing," said Viola.

Hugh grinned in acknowledgment.

The precious lump of chalk wrapped in paper was put in the basket. It was followed by a starling's egg in a pill-box, two feathers from a white turkeycock, the lower jawbone of a dog, a horse's tooth, a bag of chaff authentically cut by Bertram himself, a rather decayed ram's horn, and a mangold with a face undeniably like Harold. Mrs. Pocock's basket contained two pots of home-made strawberry jam, a bottle of elderberry wine, half a pound of butter, and a turkey's egg with which Bertram was to amaze his relations at breakfast to-morrow.

"And you won't drink more than one glass of elderberry wine at a time, will you, my dears?" Mrs. Pocock warned them. "Because I wouldn't like you to upset yourselves. But I'm regularly vexed we could only find one turkey's egg. Better luck next time. Mind you come again soon to visit me. It's nice to see young faces round this old farm."

There was a long hill to walk down from Highrood to Wrottesford, and the clock in Wrottesford steeple was striking a quarter-past eight when the trap pulled up outside the Blue Dragon.

"Just a nip to keep the cold out," Hugh urged Farmer Pocock; and the farmer, after expressing his firm belief that a nip would do him no harm, threw his reins to the ostler and got down from the trap.

If the snuggery of the Blue Dragon had looked snug that afternoon, how snug it looked now simmering in the golden lamplight. A number of shiny-faced worthies of the little market town, with pipes in their mouths and pewter pots on the table before them, were sitting round on the high-backed settles. Grave indeed was the conversation to which the children listened from a shadowy corner that evening, while from time to time Mrs. Pringle winked at them from behind the counter.

"Good evening, Farmer."

"Good evening, Mr. Wiggins."

"All looking well up at Highrood?"

"Just about."

"Ah!"

Whereupon everybody else in the snuggery ejaculated, "ah," and the pewter mugs were raised all round the room.

"Well, I believe I must be getting along back," said Farmer Pocock at last, and after wiping his moustache he shook hands tremendously with Hugh, Bertram, and Viola. As the clock in Wrottesford steeple struck a quarter to nine the sound of his wheels died away along the High Street.

"Well, I suppose we ought to be going," Hugh said. "Another small brandy, please, Mrs. Pringle."

The landlady served him and beckoned to the children.

"A thimbleful of something to keep out the cold is what you want," she declared. "It comes on very shrew on these nights before Easter."

Their uncle asked a little nervously what she was preparing to give them.

"A thimbleful of cherry-brandy," she proclaimed.

It was a tidy thimble she chose for the measure. Such a thimble would hardly have stuck firm even on Farmer Pocock's thumb. Bertram and Viola took a first sip, gasped, looked at one another, and grinned. Then they took another sip, blinked, looked at one another again, and grinned more broadly. Then they drained their glasses, blinked, gasped, blinked again, and, looking round at the Wrottesford worthies, grinned still more broadly at them, whereupon the worthies all said "ah" and grinned back.

"I reckon that's powerful good stuff of yours, Mrs. Pringle," Mr. Wiggins opined.

"It is good stuff, Mr. Wiggins. Well, it's all good stuff behind this bar, and I don't mind who hears me say so."

"Ah!" the worthies ejaculated in a chorus of assent.

The Ambles mare, like every other customer at the Blue Dragon, had been given plenty of good cheer. The oats she had munched seemed to have gone to her head, for when the clock in Wrottesford steeple chimed nine, she tried to dance sideways down the High Street to the accompaniment of stern "whoas" from Hugh and ecstatic giggles from the children, in whose minds Mrs. Pringle's thimblefuls of cherry-brandy had created a marvellous capacity for humorous response, which the brisk night air sharpened.

"She thinks she's dancing your rotten cachucha, V," Bertram suggested.

The mirth this remark inspired in his sister was so uncontrollable that she nearly laughed herself out of the

dog-cart on to the moonlit road. When the mare turned into the lane for Ambles, she set out for her stable at a cracking pace, and the springs of the dog-cart syncopated the laughter of the children with such exquisite drollery that by the time two miles had been covered there were no sounds but gurgles and gasps to syncopate.

"I've got a most frightful stitch," said Bertram.

"So have I," said Viola.

And then so marvellously funny did this seem to them that they slid down from their seat and, leaning back against the splash-board, besought each other vainly to stop laughing.

"Steady now, you two young clowns," Hugh warned them. "We're coming to the bridge. Whoa, mare! Whoa!"

The mare, who had been running like an angel between the high hazel hedges and the long avenue of sycamores was inclined to dance again at the sight of the notice board on the post, which warned extraordinary traffic against crossing the fragile bridge over the little river Wannet.

"She thinks it's a ghost, I expect," said Viola.

"Jump down, Bertram, and hold her head," his uncle told him. "That's the style. Good lad," he approved as Bertram led the animal past the glimmering notice board.

The dog-cart now started to climb the steep and densely wooded slope known as the Hanger. The track ascended in a series of wide diagonals between ancient holly bushes. Their leaves glittered in the moonbeams that pierced the bare over-arching boughs of the mighty beeches, whose last year's leaves sodden with the rains of winter still lay thick upon the track. The warmth and solemnity of the woodland, and the slow pace of the mare seemed to make for intimacy.

"I say, you kids," said Hugh suddenly, "have you heard anything about this Ambles business? I mean, do you realize that your uncle John has divided the place among the whole lot of us?"

They had managed to gather from the conversation of heir father and mother something about the state of ffairs ; but their information was very vague.

" Well, what I've been thinking," Hugh went on when e had explained to them the whole story of divided owner-hip and the difficulties of making it work properly, " what ve been thinking is that there are too many of us here. Vhat's more, most of them don't appreciate what could be one with a house like Ambles."

The children listened without interrupting.

" I was thinking just now that here we are under these ees and that I'm the Wicked Uncle and you're the Babes the Wood. Very well then, I push you out of the dog-art, whip up the mare, and houp-la, you're lost ! Get y meaning ? "

" But we wouldn't be lost in the Hanger," Bertram bjected. " We know the way to Ambles quite well from ere."

" And besides," went on Viola, whose sense of dramatic ccuracy had been offended by the muddle her uncle ad made of the old tale, " the Wicked Uncle didn't se the children. He told two Ruffians to take em."

" I know all about that," said Hugh. " But you don't et my idea. The Babes in the Wood just came into my ead, and I began to ask myself why we couldn't play e Babes in the Wood on a grand scale at Ambles ? "

" Well, we could be the two Ruffians and try to lose arold," Viola agreed. " Couldn't we, Bertram ? "

" I don't expect we could lose him," said her brother. But we could push him into the river."

" Ah, now you're getting nearer to my idea. My idea to drive all the others into clearing out of the house. arold, Frida, your aunt Hilda, your aunt Edith, uncle orenzo, uncle Jumbo, that damned dog of his, aunt eatrice—the whole boiling lot."

" And father ? " Bertram asked.

" And mother ? " Viola asked.

"No, your mother is usually acting, and your father and I are going in for pigs. My notion is to turn Ambles into a first-class hotel."

"Would we have those things like signalmen pull?" Viola asked quickly.

"You'd have everything," Hugh promised grandly.

"But we've got to go back to school in three weeks," Bertram reminded him gloomily.

"Ah, that's where I come in. Suppose I was to offer your father to tutor you both, do you think you could manage to annoy everybody else except your father? You can do what you like with the rest, as long as you keep the right side of your father. I mean to say, don't put alarm clocks under his bed or tell him the house is on fire at six o'clock in the morning, and all that sort of thing. It preys on his mind."

"It wasn't six," Viola corrected. "It was five minutes to eight."

"Well, do you like my plan?" Hugh pressed. "You won't find me a harsh tutor. Where have you got to in Latin, Bertram?"

"Reduplicated perfects," he said feelingly.

"I know. Damned awful things," Hugh agreed. "*Parco*, *parcere*, *peperi*, *partum*, eh?"

Bertram jumped.

"*Peperci*," he said. It would be some time before he forgot that stinking verb.

"You're right. I was mixing it up with the blighter that means 'to bring forth.' *Pario*, *parere*, *peperi*, *partum*. Oh, I'll be pretty peppery myself after I've looked through the Revised Latin Primer. *Amnis*, *axis*, *caulis*, *collis*, eh? Well, I'll talk it over with your father. But he's sure to agree. And you don't want to go back to school?"

Both children declared that they had no desire whatever to go back to school.

"Only, do you think I could invite Higginbotham down to stay here in the summer hols.?" Bertram asked.

"He's an awfully decent chap. V doesn't like any of the girls at her school, or she could have a friend to stay with her."

"No, they're all beastly little affected sneaking asses," Viola declared fiercely.

"I see no reason why Higginbotham shouldn't come down," Hugh said.

"He's an awfully decent chap," Bertram repeated. "His governor's in British Honduras."

"Is he, by Jove?" Hugh exclaimed. "Why, that's where your uncle John wanted me to go, and as I won't go he wants Harold to go out there when he's older. That's given me a jolly good idea. Yes, Higginbotham's the lad for us. Do you know what it is, you kids? We're going to have a clinking good time at Ambles."

"Clinking," said Bertram fervidly.

"Clinking," said Viola as fervidly.

That the children had not seemed to be so much excited over their uncle's plans for the future meant that they were more deeply impressed by them. The prospect of that future was too magnificent to be enjoyed with an obvious gush of enthusiasm. They wanted to gloat together over it in some remote woodland glade or within some hollow oak or in a corner of the stables. Moreover, it was tempting fortune to display too loudly their delight. It had not yet been settled that they were not to go back to school. Father might agree, but mother had a way of being hideously unreasonable on these occasions. This might all be nothing but a dream woven of moonlight and cherry-brandy and unlimited strawberry jam.

The dog-cart emerged upon a wide common over the brow of the Hanger. The mare quickened to a bouncing trot, and half a mile away at the end of that silvery ribbon of road the lights of Ambles were glimmering, a ruddy orange, beyond this sea of moon-washed common on which the ancient hawthorns sailed like a fleet of ships.

"Hullo!" Hugh exclaimed. "What are those other lights jigging about over there? Why, they're lanterns.

Who on earth's wandering about with lanterns on moonlight night like this ? "

"Perhaps it's Harold sugaring for moths," Bertran suggested.

But it was not Harold. It was Hilda and Beatric and Edith, standing beside the road and waving at th dog-cart like three witches on the blasted heath.

"What the . . . ?" Hugh began; but just then th mare put her head down and took them past the lanter bearers at a good thirty miles an hour.

"What in blazes do those three women think they'r doing out there ?" Hugh asked his brother James, whe the dog-cart pulled up at the stately front door of wha until a week or two ago was John Touchwood's romanti Elizabethan house, views of which had so often appeare in the illustrated weeklies. Was there in the way th brick chimneys huddled together under the moon a sugges tion that the house agreed with Hugh about there bein too many owners for its dignity ? Or were they not a much afraid of Hugh and his plans to exploit their mello beauty ?

"They're out looking for you," James shouted above th barking of his fawn-coloured bulldog.

"Looking for us ?" Hugh repeated. "I wish you' keep that blasted dog of yours quiet, James. The mar will bolt again in a moment."

"They were expecting you for lunch," said James and with this information he retired to his book and hi comfortable library chair.

Indoors, the travellers found George knitting in a arm-chair by the drawing-room fire.

"Ah, there you are," he said. "Did you bring me a evening paper ?"

Presently the agitated voices of Hilda, Edith an Beatrice resounded from the hall.

"What on earth happened ?" Hilda cried, darting int the drawing-room. "Where have you been ? We'v been out with lanterns to search for you."

" Yes, and you damn nearly threw us out of the dog-cart, aving them at us like that. What do you want lanterns or on a moonlight night like this ? "

" But where have you been ? " Beatrice asked. " Hilda ad lunch ready for you and the children. We waited nd waited."

" We didn't know what to think," Edith said tremulously. We thought something dreadful had happened. So I aid to Beatrice and Hilda, ' let's take lanterns and see if e can hear anything.' "

" I had some business the other side of Wrottesford," Hugh told his sisters, " and the kids have been with me."

" But where's the luggage ? " Hilda asked.

" My god," Hugh cried, " we've forgotten all about it. orry, George, old boy, but your worldly possessions are till at the station."

" That's all right," said George, quite unperturbed. ' I've got enough things to last me for a fortnight. But I vish you'd brought me an evening paper as you were in Wrottesford so late."

" *You* may have enough things," said Hilda fretfully, ' but what about the children's things ? What are they oing to do for to-night ? This means Harold will have o lend Bertram a pair of his pyjamas. And, Edith, erhaps Viola could have one of Frida's nightdresses ? "

" What a brilliant idea," Edith exclaimed. " I'll pop pstairs, and tell her there hasn't been an accident after ll. It will relieve her little mind. The poor child was in regular fever just now."

" I don't suppose Harold will be asleep either," Hilda amented. " It was a bitter disappointment to him when is cousins didn't arrive. He was so looking forward to howing Bertram the nests he's found already."

" Well, I like finding nests myself better," said Bertram n a voice that sounded surly, but was really sleepy.

" I shan't let you go in and see Harold if you talk like hat," his aunt threatened.

" Well, Bertram doesn't want to see him particularly,"

Viola explained with what she fancied was a kindly patience in her tone.

"I suppose, with poor Eleanor always away acting we must expect Bertram and Viola to be more boorish than children who enjoy a real home life, but really . . ." Hilda broke off and looked round for sympathy.

"Oh, shut up, Hilda, and leave the kids alone," Hugh told her. "We've had a topping day, and we don't want to have it spoilt now."

"No, I dare say you don't," his sister snapped. "But you don't mind spoiling our day. You don't mind making us wait half an hour for lunch and then have to eat it expecting to see the telegraph-boy come bicycling across the common every minute. Oh, no, so long as you enjoy your day, we don't matter. But if I'm to go on keeping house here, I must insist on punctuality for meals. It's impossible for me to plan ahead if people are going to treat Ambles like an hotel . . . well, really, Hugh, if you're going to turn round in the middle of what I'm saying and wink at Viola, I may as well say nothing at all."

"Just as well," her youngest brother agreed. "However, to show I bear no malice, Hilda, I'll tell you that you've got a sizeable beetle crawling round the collar of your blouse."

Hilda shook herself with a scream, the noise of which woke Beyle, who sprang up from the hearth-rug and rushed at her, barking wildly.

"Lie down, Bill Bailey," Beatrice commanded. But instead of obeying his mistress the bulldog went and fetched a large stone, which he had brought in from the garden and hidden under one of the sofas. The muscles on his brawny neck stood out like iron bands as he carried it across the room and dropped it with a thud on George's foot.

"My god," George groaned in pain. "What the deuce does this confounded dog of yours think he's doing?"

"He only wanted you to play with him," Beatrice explained reproachfully. "That's the way he invites

Jimmie to take him for a walk. He didn't hurt your foot, did he ? "

" Of course, he hurt my foot," George fumed. " A dog can't drop a great rock on one's foot without hurting it. He dropped it on a corn too, the brute, and I've only got on carpet-slippers."

" I believe it's one of the stones Frida was collecting for her little rockery," Edith said. " She'll be so upset to hear it hurt one of her dear uncles."

" It'll hurt some more of them if that confounded dog isn't chained up. Look at him now," George pointed out indignantly.

Beyle had picked up the large stone again and was swaggering round the room with it, his tail wagging with self-esteem.

Beatrice ran to the door and called across the hall to James, who summoned Beyle to his side in the library. Beyle immediately hurried off with the large stone, under the impression that his master wanted it urgently.

" I don't often make a fuss," said George. " But it was so unexpected. It made me drop a stitch too," he grumbled, looking down at his knitting. " I was wondering whether I'd be able to get an evening paper on Easter Monday, when, crash ! This great rock . . ." he grumbled on into incoherence.

" Well, I must see about those pyjamas now for Bertram," said Hilda. " Come along, Bertram. What have you got in those baskets ? "

" Some things of ours."

" I'm not going to have you taking a lot of food and stuff upstairs to your bedroom."

" It's my own room," said Bertram. " Uncle John gave it to me."

" The kid's got a perfect right to take baskets up to his room," Hugh put in.

" If I say he's not to, he's not to. George, I appeal to you."

" I can't stand a long conversation about baskets at

this time of night," said George. "Besides, my foot hurts too much."

"Where am I going to sleep?" Viola asked at this point.

"You're going to sleep with Frida," she was told.

"Why?"

"Because that's the way your aunt Edith and I have arranged things," Hilda said sharply.

"Well, I'll sleep with her to-night," Viola said. "But to-morrow I'm going to find a room for myself. Uncle John gave me one."

"Hugh, you've been stuffing these children's heads with nonsense, I know you have," Hilda complained. "Well, I'm too tired after all our anxiety to argue any more to-night. Come along, Bertram," she urged wearily. "Edith, will you take Viola up? Say good-night, both of you, to everybody."

It was noticeable that Beatrice looked a little surprised when her niece leaned over to kiss her.

It was noticeable that Edith winced when Bertram saluted her, and that when he saluted Beatrice she drew back with a dazed expression. But when Viola offered her red lips to Hilda, her aunt swung round to denounce Hugh.

"Have you been giving these children spirits?" she demanded sternly.

"Of course I haven't. They don't need any more than they have already."

"Don't make cheap jokes. You know what I mean. Come here, Bertram."

She pounced on him so quickly that she caught full the eloquent breath of a wide yawn.

"Pah! Their breaths simply reek of whisky."

"Ha-ha, whisky!" Hugh jeered. "Can't you tell the difference between whisky and cherry-brandy?"

"I only know that one is as bad as the other," said Hilda. "No wonder they were talking like that about their rooms! George, will you speak to Hugh! He's

been plying Bertram and Viola with cherry-brandy. It's revolting."

"Well, get them off to bed," George advised.

In the hall Bertram tripped over Beyle's stone, which the bulldog had brought out there and deserted on finding that his master was too much interested in a critical study of Stendhal to roll his toy across the library floor for him to retrieve it with growls of exultation.

"What did I tell you," Hilda demanded rhetorically. "The wretched boy can hardly stand on his feet."

Bertram yawned again.

The railway journey, the visit to Highrood Farm, the air, the hour, the cherry-brandy, and the unlimited strawberry jam, had mingled in a potent soporific. Probably for the first time in his life he was not unwilling to go to bed.

"I can't let you visit Harold to-night," said Hilda. "I'll bring you your pyjamas. Edith, what are you going to do about Viola and Frida? Hadn't Frida better sleep with you? I really do think Hugh is the limit. Well, John may be eccentric in many ways, but I'm not surprised he was anxious to ship Hugh off to British Honduras. It's the only place for him in my opinion."

"I'm going to sleep with Bertram," Viola proclaimed firmly.

"You are not," said Hilda. "You are going . . ."

"Well, I don't mind sleeping with uncle Hugh," her niece interrupted.

"Of course, they're completely out of hand," Hilda bewailed to Edith.

"Oh, I think she'd better sleep with Frida as we settled," Edith said. "The poor child's nearly asleep already."

"I'm not," Viola contradicted. "I'm only yawning because Bertram keeps yawning."

"I'm not yawning, you a-a-ass," Bertram yawned.

"Yes, you are, you a-a-ass," his sister retorted.

But they were by now both so sleepy that, with all the will in the world, they could not give any more trouble that night.

"Why didn't Viola kiss me?" Frida whispered in her mother's ear when she bent over fondly to wish her little lank-haired daughter a last good-night.

"Because she's already fast asleep, darling. She'll kiss you in the morning. Good-night, my pet."

Further along the passage Harold was interrogating his mother.

"Why did cousin Bertram want my pyjamas, mother?"

"Because he hasn't pyjamas of his own. They're in the luggage, which hasn't arrived yet."

"Why hasn't it?"

"It's too long a story to tell you now, Harold. Turn over and go to sleep. Mother's tired out."

"Oh, do tell me, mother. Was there a railway accident?"

"No, no."

"Well, why didn't the luggage come?"

"Because it got left at the station."

"Why was it left at the station?"

"Because it was."

"Why?"

But Hilda had gained the door of her son's room by now, and, closing it rapidly behind her, she escaped.

At this moment in New York John Touchwood and his wife were just leaving the Plaza Hotel after tea.

"I wonder what they're all doing at Ambles?" Doris laughed.

"Let me see, it's about eleven over there by now," said John. "Well, I should guess that James was reading in the library with that horrible dog of his snorting on the hearth-rug, and I should guess that Hugh was pouring himself out another whisky and soda, a rather strong one, and that George was saying that perhaps after all he *would* have one before turning in, and that Edith and Hilda were telling each other how much better brought up Frida and Harold were than Bertram and Viola, and that Eleanor was telling Beatrice she couldn't understand what

I saw in you, my adorable Doris, and that Laurence was boring somebody somewhere in the house."

John did not guess badly, for at this moment Hugh was standing with his hand on the syphon and saying to George:

"Colorado, old man?"

"Well, perhaps just a little stronger than usual," George was replying.

But James in the library had let the volume of Stendhal slide down over the arm of his chair and was snoring away as loudly as his fawn-coloured bulldog.

CHAPTER VI

APRIL FOLLY

"THERE are not many country houses in England more delightfully placed than Ambles, and there are few even of the lesser country houses more beautiful in themselves." Thus the article about it in *Country Life* began, and it was true.

Lying as it did almost midway between the little market-town of Wrottesford and the larger market-town of Galton, the stations of which were on different branches of the South-Western Railway, and five miles from either, Ambles was, in these days before automobiles were everybody's vehicles, really remote. Although London was only sixty miles away, this corner of Hampshire might have been the unspoilt depths of Dorsetshire. Here and there in a country of game-preserves and twelve-hundred acre farms the wanderer might pass a cluster of thatched cottages large enough to be called a hamlet; except for these and a few isolated farm-houses, and two or three Palladian edifices set in their own parks, the evidence of humanity in the neighbourhood was rare. The bricks of Ambles had been dyed by the summers of three centuries to an incomparable warmth of hue; the long mossy roofs sloped in every direction; the windows looked as if they had been built because they had found a jolly place from which to look out on the green world. There was a walled vegetable and flower garden, a lawn large enough for a tennis-court and a croquet-court, a great tulip-tree under the shade of which one could watch the

players, and an apple-orchard which contained a particularly fine old tree of Blenheim Oranges. In front spread a wide stretch of common-land dotted with ancient hawthorn-trees and flanked with sheltering woods of beech and oak. Behind the gardens, the twenty-acre field which John Touchwood had recently bought provided a miniature park, and beyond that the land sloped gradually down to the valley of the Wannet to rise again steeply on the other side of the little river in a line of downs.

Inside, much of the house was panelled, and it was veined with irregular passages leading now up three stairs, now down three stairs into rooms on various levels. Ambles was, as Hugh said, when he first tried to divide it up into five portions, an architectural puzzle.

During the preliminary discussions it had been agreed that the drawing-room and the dining-room and the kitchen with its satellite pantries and sculleries should belong to all in common. And then a tussle took place between James and Laurence for the library. James pointed out that Laurence had already furnished a study for himself upstairs when he gave up the living of Newton Candover and moved into Ambles with the contents of his vicarage. Laurence replied that the creative work of writing poetical dramas about the great figures of apostolic times required a better room than the merely critical work which occupied James. To this James retorted that, inasmuch as Laurence proposed to act as well as write, whereas he proposed to spend all his time at Ambles in writing, he was entitled to the library; and, with the support of the others, who were anxious to get Laurence as far away as possible from the centres of communal life, James won. George secured for himself, after a fight with Hilda, what was known as the garden room. Hilda's point was that this small room on the ground floor was an ideal room in which to have tea in summer when it was raining, and when she was outvoted over this pleaded that it was an ideal room from which to direct the domestic mechanism. This claim was satisfied by

awarding her another room nearer the kitchen, and George, who had remained absolutely firm on the necessity of having his sitting-room on the ground floor, gained possession of the garden room. But it would be as tedious as the preliminary discussions themselves to prolong the history of how the owners of the house fitted themselves in. Let it suffice to say that somehow they managed to do so.

"Well, I do think we've managed that really well," Beatrice had declared in an effervescence of good will. To her own astonishment she had managed to secure for herself what she called a boudoir, a possession of which she had dreamed for years in the various furnished apartments where she and James with a few odds and ends of their own furniture had lived for so many years.

And then Hugh had spoken:

"Yes, you've all managed it splendidly. But let me remind you that one-fifth of Ambles is mine, although the whole of the private space I occupy in it at present is bounded by the four walls of one of the attics."

In vain the others had pointed out to him that he had no furniture with which to take advantage of more rooms.

"It won't do," he had said. "Furnished or unfurnished, I'm entitled to the rooms and to my fifth of Johnnie's furniture. If I insist on my share the solicitors will back me up. And that would mean some of you going short. Yes, you may well look depressed, Beatrice your boudoir would be the first to go."

"But you're a bachelor, Hugh."

"I am at present; but I may be thinking of getting married. Do you suppose I'm going to bring my young bride down here and plant her in an attic?"

"But there's time to talk about that when you get engaged," poor Beatrice had argued a little tremulously for the thought of having her boudoir taken away was heart-rending.

"Time enough, I dare say," Hugh had scoffed, "when you've all had time to settle down in rooms that don't belong to you and when you've all grown to believe tha

hey are your very own. No, I don't mind your using ny rooms temporarily, but in order to make it perfectly lear that you are really my tenants I propose to pay only wenty-five shillings a week to the common fund instead f thirty shillings."

There had been a rustle of indignant petticoats, which Hugh had quelled immediately.

"Do you agree or not? If you don't, we'll pay a visit o the solicitors."

"Well, I call it blackmail," Hilda had declared, and n the look she had given to the others there had been an ppeal to stand up to Hugh now lest he should end by yrannizing over all of them.

"You can call it what you like; but, unless you agree o my terms, I am going to have four of the twenty rooms n Ambles."

"And what about the servants' rooms?" Hilda had sked.

"Yes, they certainly belong to all of us in common," he others had argued.

"Isn't John paying all the outdoor servants—Huggins nd Pobjoy and William?" Hugh had demanded. "Very vell then, I'll go and board with Huggins in his cottage, nd I'll keep my rooms in the house empty. Yes, and I'll eep my share of the dining-room and the drawing-room mpty—yes, and by gad, my share of the kitchen range oo," he had vowed.

And in the end, although the others might agree with Hilda that the position Hugh had taken up was extremely bjectionable, they had had to surrender to his terms.

The first person in the house to wake on that fine April norning after the arrival of Bertram and Viola was Harold. He lay still for a while, listening to the song of the birds n the garden and planning to raid their nests one by one. Then he put on his spectacles and sat up in bed to gaze round the room and gloat over his possessions. He had ust fixed his eyes on his air-gun with pride of ownership vhen above the whistling of the birds he heard the whistle

of William the boy about his work in the stable-yard. Harold had fallen asleep last night with the mystery of the luggage unsolved, and as soon as he heard William he jumped out of bed and ran to the window to see if it had arrived.

"William," he called down to the assistant-groom, who was busy with various buckets. "Are you there?"

Button-headed William did not take long to see where the voice came from, for Harold's spectacles were glinting in the morning sun like a heliograph.

"No, I'm here, glass-eyes."

"William, has the luggage come?" Harold gulped, in a flood of curiosity.

"No, I'm just going over to Four Lanes Farm to see if they can send in the wagon for it."

"Where is it?"

"Wrottesford Station."

"Why?"

"Why not?" William asked.

"Can I come with you to Four Lanes Farm, William?"

"If you loike."

William's habit of saying "loike" instead of "like" had led Harold's mother to forbid his spending much time in William's company, so William possessed for Harold a rich aroma of forbidden fruit.

"Well, I will. I'll come down when I'm dressed. I'm going to be as quiet as a mouse dressing."

Harold always felt a bit of a Juliet when he talked from his window to this Romeo with whom overmuch dalliance was so strictly forbidden.

The forbidden fruit looked up at the last remark and answered Harold's coy announcement with that unpleasant and vulgar noise which is called a raspberry. Harold did not possess the romantic charm for him that he possessed for Harold.

About ten minutes later William, with his hands in the pockets of his breeches, was stepping out across the dewy fields to Four Lanes Farm, and Harold, with his hand

tucked into the front of his knickerbockers (for, alas, he did not possess pockets in front like William), was stepping out beside him.

Within half an hour Harold was on his way to Wrottesford in the farm wagon. The problem of the missing luggage had worried him so much that he was even prepared to be late for breakfast, could he but solve it. The early bird may catch the worm, but the early boy catches the early bird. Bertram had observed Harold trudging across the fields with William toward Four Lanes Farm, and anxious to know what that early walk portended Bertram had dressed and strolled along to Four Lanes Farm himself, there to be told of Harold's expedition into Wrottesford for the luggage. He was staggered by his cousin's impudence.

"I say," he cried when he burst into the room where Viola and Frida were sleeping. "I say, V, get up, get up! The most frightful cheek! Harold has sneaked into Wrottesford to fetch our luggage."

"The foxy little hog!" cried Viola, springing up in bed, her cheeks exquisitely flushed with sleep, her dark curly hair all tangled and tumbled. In the other bed Frida sat up more primly, her pale eyes staring in apprehension, her lank fair hair plaited in two pigtails and pushed back to display all her pale forehead.

"Hullo, Frida," said Bertram. "I say, that dirty little cad has sneaked off to go and fetch *our* luggage."

"What luggage?" Frida asked.

"*Our* luggage, you silly chump. There's masses and masses of it at the station."

"Well, we must rescue it," Viola declared, with which she leapt out of bed and pulled off her nightgown in her eagerness to be dressed and away.

"Oh, Viola, how can you be so rude?" Frida murmured, and shrank with her blushes beneath the bedclothes.

"Huh!" Viola scoffed. "I can be a jolly sight ruder than that, can't I, Bertram? So can Bertram, can't you, Bertram?"

"No, no," Frida exhaled in a muffled scream as she pressed her fingers against her eyes.

"Shall we, Bertram?" Viola asked.

But her brother frowned. He had no time to waste in shocking Frida that morning. Harold was the quarry.

"Hurry up and get dressed," he commanded. "I'll meet you in the potting-shed by the greenhouse."

He went off in search of Hugh. Unfortunately, in the sleepiness of last night, he had not remembered to note which was his uncle Hugh's room. There was only one way to find out. He must open every bedroom door in the house and peep in. The first door he tried was that of James and Beatrice. From the curtained twilight Beyle sprang at him with a growl, and he had to shut the door pretty quick, his heart beating. The next door opened to reveal aunt Edith already seated at her toilet-table.

"What's the matter?" she cried. "Is little Frida ill? I'll come at once. Say I'll come at once."

Bertram slammed that door too, and rushed along to the end of the corridor before his aunt could emerge. Finally, after waking practically everybody in the house except his father, he discovered the room he wanted. Hugh was sleeping soundly.

"Uncle Hugh!"

No reply.

"Uncle Hugh!" he called more loudly.

Bertram reflected on the contrariness of life. The person he wanted to waken remained impenetrably asleep. Even shaking him had no affect. He hesitated to use a wet sponge. He had once tried a wet sponge on his father, and the vengeance had been so unexpectedly swift and severe that . . . and yet . . .

"Uncle Hugh!" he yelled once more.

"Wassamarra?"

"Oh, uncle Hugh, do wake up. Harold's gone in to Wrottesford to fetch our luggage."

"Wassati?"

"I don't know, but will you come and join an ambush?"

"My god," Hugh exclaimed, sitting up in bed at last. "What *are* you talking about?"

Bertram explained the crisis.

"And my Indian dress is *in* the luggage," he concluded. "And so's Viola's."

Hugh listened sympathetically to the tale of Harold's outrage; but nothing would induce him to take any part in the rescue operations.

"If you offered me the full rig-out of an Esquimaux, my beamish boy, I wouldn't hang about in an ambush at this hour of the morning. I'm grieved to hear that Harold is one up on you, and if you get behind a hedge and bring him down off the top of that luggage with a slug from his own air-gun I'll congratulate you at breakfast. Till then, say au revoir, Bertram, but not good-bye."

With this Hugh settled himself down among the bedclothes and was apparently fast asleep before his nephew had wandered a little disconsolately from the room. Indeed, when Bertram joined Viola in the potting-shed it required all her enthusiasm to restore him to the mood of derring-do into which the first news of Harold's unparalleled cheek had plunged him.

"Well, why don't you shoot him with that air-gun of his?" she urged. "He's shot lots of birds with it. We needn't shoot him through the heart and kill him. We could shoot him in the leg."

"Yes, but what are we going to be?" Bertram objected. "I thought we'd be Indians stopping the mail-coach; but our Indian dresses are in the luggage, so we can't be that."

"Why can't we be Dick Turpin and Jack Sheppard?" he suggested.

"No, we've been highwaymen so often," her brother moaned like a tired novelist called upon by his publisher to give the public what he gave it last time.

"Well, couldn't we be Corsicans having a vendetta?"

"But the luggage!" Bertram pointed out a little

fretfully, for, truth to tell, that unlimited strawberry jam of yesterday was asserting itself. "Corsicans don't go about with all that luggage."

"Brigands?"

"I'm sick of being brigands."

"Pirates!" Viola suggested. She must have eaten less jam than her brother to be so bright. "We could pretend the wagon was a treasure-ship and board it."

"Don't be an ass, you ass," her brother entreated, more peevishly than ever. "What's the good of pretending the wagon is a ship when we haven't got a ship ourselves?"

"Couldn't we make the bridge at the bottom of the Hanger our ship? Oh, yes, that would be glorious Bertram, because then we could make Harold walk the plank into the river, or we could board the ship and push him overboard."

"But suppose we pushed one of mother's baskets into the river? She might be rather shirty if we did."

Viola gazed anxiously at her brother. This unusual prudence, which she did not connect with the unlimited strawberry jam of yesterday, disturbed her.

"You're not turning pi, are you, Bertram?" she besought him. "You haven't had a vision or anything have you?"

Bertram was shamed out of his lassitude.

"All right," he agreed. "We'll be pirates."

Viola danced a hornpipe round the potting-shed to welcome her brother back to his normal self.

"Well, shut up showing off, you ass. I'm going to be Flint and sometimes Israel Hands, because he was Flint's gunner, and you can be Billy Bones and sometimes Pew or Job Anderson. I wish uncle Hugh would have come. If he had, he could have been Long John Silver.

"Well, perhaps he would," said Viola, "if he knew he could be John Silver. Shall I go and ask him?"

"No, no, he said he wasn't damned well going to get up for another three hours. What's the time now?"

"It was a quarter to seven when I came down from Frida. Ought we to ask her to join our ship? She might be Ben Gunn. He was rather a silly."

Bertram considered the possibility of passing the time away until Harold's ship was sighted by marooning Frida on one bank of the small river Wannet and pretending that it was an island; but finally he decided against it on the grounds that Frida was too much of a little ass.

The equipment of the *Walrus* was the next consideration. Luckily they found outside the greenhouse a length of hot-water pipe which would plump round shot into Harold's ship and sink him if he tried to escape. As a matter of fact it very nearly sank the pirates before they reached the bridge with it. About half-way down the Hanger Bertram dropped his end of the cannon and said it was not worth the fag of lugging any further.

"Shiver my timbers, Captain Flint," Lieutenant Viola Bones observed trenchantly, "but if you will not carry the blasted cannon, I will carry it myself. Shame on you for a craven loon!"

"Well, I didn't think it was so beastly heavy," said Captain Bertram Flint. "And you can't talk like that to Captain Flint, you ass. He'd have shot you dead on the spot."

"Well, Flint wouldn't have dropped the end of a cannon like that."

"Well, I don't suppose he ever carried cannons about himself, you fathead."

"Yes, but you said you were Israel Hands as well, and he was Flint's gunner. So pick it up, you lubberly son of a rum-puncheon."

"I'll smack your head in a minute, young Viola, if you cheek me like that," said her brother.

"Avast!" Viola muttered scornfully.

"Look here, we're not pirates yet, so shut up cheeking me," he repeated.

"Well, if we're not pirates," she declared, dropping

her end of the hot-water pipe, "fain I carrying this beastly pipe any further."

"All right, you ass, come on," he said.

And on they toiled with the cannon of the *Walrus*, which when it leaned over the parapet of Hanger Bridge certainly did give it a splendidly piratical appearance.

"Phew! I'm sweating like anything," said Captain Flint, sitting down on the quarter-deck and taking a stone out of his shoe.

"So am I," said Lieutenant Bones, pulling up his stockings and straightening his garters.

"I hope nobody will come along and bag the cannon while we are fetching the cutlasses," said Captain Flint, sweeping the horizon with his telescope.

"Have no fear, Captain. There lives not a saucy knave who would dare board the *Walrus*," declared Lieutenant Bones confidently. "When doth the gallant merchantman leave the fair port of Wrottésford for the Spanish Main, think you?"

"Look here, we're not acting *Westward Ho!*" Bertram protested. "You always want to do too much. You're too cocky about your acting. Let's go and get the cutlasses."

It was a long pull up the Hanger, and by the time they reached the house it was after eight o'clock. The cutlasses were finally reduced to the poker from the library and the poker from the drawing-room, because Bertram said his arms ached too much to carry anything else, nor did Viola insist.

"But I think I'll go and see if I can get something to eat from the kitchen," he told her. "I'm beginning to feel a bit hungry."

The transport of that cannon had disposed of the last seeds of yesterday's strawberry jam.

In about five minutes Bertram rejoined his sister in the potting-shed, his rosy face crimson with indignation.

"I say," he cried, "she wouldn't give me anything but this!"

He displayed two pieces of dry bread.

"What?" exclaimed Viola in horror, disgust and surprise. "What did she say?"

"She said it was more than her life was worth with Mrs. Curtis to give us any butter. She wouldn't even give me a handful of currants."

"Good lummy!" Viola gasped.

"Yes, but wait a bit," Bertram continued, "when I told her that Mrs. Worfolk always gave us currants, she said, 'That's as may be, but I'm not Mrs. Worfolk.' And when I said, 'No, you're jolly well not. Mrs. Worfolk is a thousand times better than you,' she called me a young saucebox."

"A young sauceboat?" Viola echoed.

"No, you ass, a saucebox."

"What frightful cheek!"

"Yes, but wait a minute, when I told her not to try and be funny she said another word from me and she'd fetch aunt Hilda."

"What did you say then?"

"Well, I didn't say anything. I felt in such a frightful wax that I went out of the kitchen. And then I remembered about the butter Mrs. Pocock gave us yesterday, and I thought if we had that and the elderberry wine, but not the strawberry jam, because I think we'll keep that for a bit, we should be able to provision the ship. And then what do you think?"

Viola shook her head. She felt incapable of imagining worse.

"The basket isn't in my room! And I swear I took it up to bed with me last night."

"Bertram! Are you sure you did?"

"Yes, but I was rather sleepy, and when aunt Hilda came in with the pyjamas I didn't notice if she took the basket out with her."

Viola's world was falling to pieces. That cooks should refuse to supply one with more than two pieces of dry bread and that aunts should arrogate to themselves the

right to appropriate baskets of food presented by farmers wives, such behaviour shook the very foundations of he being.

"Well, we'd better go back to the *Walrus*," she sai gloomily.

"Right-o," her brother agreed, he, too, the prey of sickening doubt about the security of the familiar world.

They walked along over the common in silence. A stoa hurrying home, arched and tawny, to shelter after morning's sport with the rabbits crossed the road befor them; but not even that roused either child into makin a remark, and it was not until they were half-way dow through the Hanger that Bertram suddenly called out:

"Hush! Is that wheels?"

Yes, the sound was unmistakably wheels.

They rushed helter-skelter down the wide woodland pat to get aboard the *Walrus* and man the gun. But o reaching the bridge they only saw a tinker's wretched car not worth powder and shot.

And as this contemptible craft rounded the next fore land Captain Flint emitted a cry of despair.

"What's the matter?" Lieutenant Bones asked i dismay.

"Good lummy, we haven't got a Black Flag."

"Bertram!"

She put out a hand and touched his sleeve tenderly, fo at that moment Lieutenant Bones fancied that the blood and merciless pirate Flint was going to break down an weep like a child.

"It's the fault of that beastly new cook," said Bertram "I was going to cut a piece of black stuff I saw on top o a chest of drawers and I was going to cut out a skull an cross-bones in paper and stick them on, but I was s waxy with that stinking new cook that I forgot."

Viola took out her handkerchief and looked at i critically. To be sure, it was what Miss Coldwell, he late governess, would have called black, but it was no the genuine black of the Jolly Roger.

"Is your handkerchief black enough, Bertram?"

No, that was not black enough either, though it was stained here and there with the juice of Mrs. Pocock's bottled cherries; and in a desperate attempt to compensate for the absence of the Jolly Roger he tied it round his head to represent a blood-stained bandage.

"Never mind," said Viola, "we couldn't have hoisted the Black Flag, because we haven't got a mast."

"Yes, we have. I saw an old hop-pole or something just inside the Hanger, and that would have made a spiffing mast if I hadn't forgotten the Black Flag."

"Why, Bertram, what sillies we are! I can use one of my stockings."

And certainly, when the mast was stepped and the stocking drooped from it in the idle air of that April morning, it managed to present a superbly sinister appearance. Then the pirates leaned against the bulwarks of the *Walrus* and waited for their victim to heave in sight. He was a long time about it. They waited, and waited, and waited, and waited. They grew so hungry that they began to wish they had not flung to the birds the dry bread offered to them by the new cook. They sustained themselves for a while by thinking of the splash Harold would make when they surged up on to the deck of the treasure-ship and drove the crew overboard. It was a nourishing fancy, but it was not nourishing enough to make up for the absence of breakfast. At last the postman was sighted cycling along the sycamore avenue where the treasure-ship was expected. He dismounted at the bridge to wheel his machine up the Hanger. They asked him the time.

"Ten o'clock?" the pirates repeated in amazement.

No wonder they were feeling hungry!

"Did you see a wagon with a lot of luggage on the road?"

The postman told them he had passed it on his rounds an hour ago.

"Well, where is it?"

"Why, back at Four Lanes Farm by now, I should think."

"But it hasn't passed here."

"No, and never will. You wouldn't expect them to take a gurt wagon-load like that over Hanger Bridge. Why, it wouldn't bear the half of a gurt load like that."

It was nearly half-past ten when the pirates reached the pleasant Isle of Aves, where Harold was the first to greet them on the sunny strand.

"Where have you been? Where have you been?" he demanded in a spuffle of self-importance, as he stood outside the front-door, goggling at them. "I went in to Wrottesford to fetch your luggage with William, and what do you think I had for breakfast because I was so hungry?"

The two pirates, gaunt from their long exposure to the tropic sun, stared at this plump merchantman, a fearful question in their eyes.

"I had a turkey's egg for a grand surprise," Harold proclaimed, his legs fidgeting with excitement and describing angles such as Euclid never dreamed of.

"A turkey's egg?" Bertram and Viola echoed thinly.

Then they rushed at Harold and drove him backward into a full-bloomed Siberian crab-apple. Harold's yells brought Hilda and Edith out of the house.

"Mother! Mother!" he wailed from a cloud of falling petals. "Mother! My face is being all scratched! Mother!"

Edith managed to catch hold of Viola, and Hilda seized Bertram.

"What are you doing, you outrageous children? Where have you been?"

"He ate my turkey's egg," shouted Bertram, shaking himself free from his aunt and driving Harold back again into the Siberian crab-apple.

"He ate Bertram's turkey's egg," cried Viola, fighting herself free of Edith's too gentle grasp and plunging in to the help of her brother.

"They'll murder the child between them, the little fiends!" cried Hilda. "Where's George?"

But George was not available for salvage operations. George was, in fact, still in bed, listening to a lecture from Hugh on the subject of Berkshire pigs.

"Well, I'm quite willing to go in for keeping these animals," he was telling Hugh, "but I hope it won't mean much personal responsibility for me."

"No responsibility at all, old man, apart from the initial capital."

"Oh, initial capital is required, is it?"

"Just for a time, until we start selling the young ones."

"Well, of course, if Eleanor's play is a success, it might make it easier for me to put my hand on a little capital."

"No need for that at all, old man. You remember Johnnie said he'd pay for Bertram and Viola to go to a good boarding-school?"

"Yes; he found out what it was like having children when he had them to stay with him at Church Row last autumn."

"Very well, there's your capital."

"What do you mean, there's my capital? We're selling young pigs, aren't we, not children?"

"You don't get me, old boy," said Hugh.

"No, I don't. I don't see the least connexion between raising capital to buy pigs and sending my two pigs—my two kids, I mean, to a boarding-school."

"Well, I'll tell you in a word," said Hugh, lighting a cigarette and blowing a cloud of smoke. "I'm the boarding-school."

"What do you mean, you're the boarding-school? I wish you wouldn't come here and disturb me by trying to be funny. And I wish you wouldn't smoke those horrible cigarettes of yours before I'm up. I've always got on very well with you, Hugh. But we shan't get on at all if you come charging in at this hour of the morning to make elaborate jokes and puff that abominable cigarette smoke all over my room. It's an infernal strain on my

nerves to do anything before lunch. It upsets me for the whole day. Why, I don't even read a morning paper."

Hugh listened to this tirade with a broad smile.

"Cheer up, old man, I'm not being funny," he said.

"No, you're not being at all funny. But you're grinning at me over the edge of the bed like a Cheshire cat."

"Seriously, George, I mean what I say. If you can get the money out of Johnnie's solicitors to send both your kids to school, I'll undertake their education here for nothing, provided you invest the money in pigs and go halves with me in the profits. That's better than borrowing the money out of your wife's salary."

George was evidently impressed by his youngest brother's proposal. He even sat up in bed.

"Yes, but wait a bit," he objected. "Won't the solicitors want the school bills to be sent to them?"

"Well, we'll send them," said Hugh.

"Isn't that fraud?" George asked doubtfully.

"Call it sharp practice," Hugh suggested. "But John won't be in America for ever, and when he comes back we can tell him. When he sees what a profit we're making out of pigs, he'll be only too glad. After all, I intend to give the kids a damned good education. Every morning at half-past nine, when term begins, you'll see me in the schoolroom ruling them with a whopping great ruler."

"*I* shan't see you," said George positively. "But the others will. And they'll smell a rat."

"It's nothing to do with Hilda or Edith or Laurence," Hugh argued. "If they like to send their kids to a boarding-school, they can. And if they like to send them to my school, they can—if they pay the fees."

"But Hilda's bound to write to John and put him up to what we're doing."

"Don't you worry about Hilda, old man. I'm going to fix Hilda presently. In fact I don't mind telling you that I'm going to fix the lot of them, one by one."

And, as if to illustrate the ease of what he was going to do, Hugh puffed out a perfect ring of smoke and then

puffed three more rings through it, one after another in rapid succession.

George stared at his brother apprehensively. He fancied he saw a baleful light flickering in his eyes.

"Look here, steady, Hugh; you oughtn't to talk like that. If anything happened people might think you'd been . . ."

"I've pretty well settled how I'm going to fix Hilda," Hugh rattled on. "But I've not yet worked out plans for getting rid of the others."

"No, really, Hugh, I mean it. Steady! I know you don't mean any harm, but really if anybody was to hear you, it might get us into trouble."

"But we must get rid of them," Hugh insisted. "The pigs are only a start. I was going to tell you all this last night, George, but I thought I'd sleep over it first."

"Yes, that's always best," George agreed cordially.

"I said to myself yesterday when I was driving back in the moonlight with your two kids, I said to myself, 'what an hotel!'"

"Where?"

"Here."

"Here? But there's no hotel here."

"I know there isn't. That's what I was thinking."

"Hugh," said his elder brother seriously, "if there's one thing in life I abominate it's a long meandering conversation in the early morning. It wears me out. I didn't really feel like talking to you about pigs, but if you're going to tell me all about your dreams . . ."

"Keep calm, old man, I know what I'm talking about."

"I dare say you do, but I haven't the remotest idea what you're talking about. And don't put your filthy cigarette-ends in my soap-dish."

"I'm talking about turning Ambles into an hotel," Hugh went on, dropping the cigarette-end neatly down among George's toothbrushes. "Now don't start arguing with me, George, old boy, till you've heard what I've got to say."

"I'm not arguing with you," George burst in, "but take that infernal cigarette-end out of my toothbrushes."

"It's out now."

"I don't care whether it's out or not. I don't want cigarette-ends mixed up with my toothbrushes."

"George, old man," said his brother solemnly, "you're getting fussy. That's a sign of middle age. Now, listen to me. Suppose we could between us get rid of the others, wouldn't Ambles as an hotel be a proposition? We should want about ten good paying guests."

George, whose experience of paying guests was largely based on life in theatrical lodgings and in boarding-establishments, looked doubtful.

"Yes, but from what I've been told," he said, "the difficulty is ever to make them pay."

"We might fix up a jolly little nine-hole golf-course on the common," Hugh continued. "We should have our own cows, of course. Pigs we've arranged for already. Eggs. Vegetables. Why, the thing's a certainty, because don't forget we shall have no rent to pay. The only thing is we must get rid of the others first. I know what I'm going to do to fix Hilda."

"What are you going to do? Because if it's anything . . ."

"I'll tell you when the time comes. Meanwhile, George you've got to concentrate on getting rid of Laurence Edith, Frida, James, Beatrice, and their dog."

"I don't mind trying to get rid of that infernal dog," said George. "Do you know he bruised three of my toes last night by dropping that great rock on them?"

"Well, you won't get rid of James's dog till you've persuaded James himself to leave Ambles."

"That will be a bit difficult. He was saying yesterday that he wasn't sure if he should bring out that paper of his after all. If you wanted to get rid of him, you ought to have kept him out of John's library. He's as happy in there as an old cart-horse turned out to grass."

"Well, I shall think of a way," said Hugh confidently.

"As a matter of fact I wouldn't object to James being here, if he hadn't brought that infernal dog with him," George said. "But that dog's a dangerous nuisance."

"Ah, but we want the library for the hotel smoking-room. You see the beauty of my scheme, George, is that I'm an architect. Look what that will save. Half the hotels built are ruined by the architect before they ever open. You see, the average architect has got to think of his commission, whereas I shall try to keep the alterations down. I tell you my being an architect is going to save us pounds."

"Well, I think that before we push poor old James out we ought to push Laurence out," George declared firmly. "Of course, Eleanor might find him an engagement; but I doubt it, and anyway, what's one engagement? He'll be back here in a fortnight. You've no idea what a rest it has been for me these few days not to have that fellow blithering around. I'm dreading his coming down here again. Absolutely dreading it."

"Well, I shall think of a way of getting rid of him," said Hugh as confidently as ever.

"It'll be a miracle if you do," said George hopelessly.

"George, old man, you've said it."

"Said what?"

"A miracle will do the trick. We want to get back his faith for him, don't we?"

"Do we?" George asked doubtfully.

"Yes, because if he gets his faith back, he'll become a parson again."

"Well, we don't want him to do any more preaching than he does already," George objected.

"You don't get me, old man. If he becomes a parson again he'll feel he must go and get a living somewhere. George, I'm going to work a miracle on him. Who was that chap who was suddenly converted?"

"Do you mean Bunyan?"

"No, no, leave your foot alone. Somebody in the Bible."

"Somebody in the Bible?" George repeated indignantly. "Why, people are always getting converted in the Bible. How am I to know which you mean?"

"Paul!" Hugh exclaimed. "That's who I mean. Isn't Laurence writing a play about him?"

George grunted incoherently.

"Well, I'm going to convert Laurence," said Hugh. "A length of magnesium wire and a megaphone, and I'll have him gibbering on his knees in two two's."

But Hugh was unable to elaborate his plan for George's benefit, because at that moment a knock on the door interrupted the conspiracy and Hilda came in.

"George, I really must ask you to keep your children in order. They were knocking Harold about in the most shameful way. I actually had to get Huggins to help me to pull Bertram off him, and he hates being taken away from his work in the garden at this busy time of year."

"I'll go down and restore order," Hugh volunteered.

"You restore order?" Hilda sneered. "You just encourage Bertram and Viola."

"Wow-wow," said Hugh, as he closed the door of the bedroom behind him.

Hilda turned round on George with another grievance.

"And what's to be done with your luggage? The hall is absolutely impassable. Will you please get dressed as quickly as possible and let me know where all the baskets are to be put, and which are the children's things, and which are yours? Are you going to unpack everything up here?"

"Unpack?" George ejaculated, passing a plump hand across his dazed brow.

"Yes, unpack. You don't suppose I've time to unpack for you, do you?" his sister asked angrily.

"Well, *I* can't unpack," George protested. "I dare say Eleanor will manage to get down on Sunday week, and till then the things will just have to wait."

"But I tell you the hall's impassable. I had to climb

over two enormous baskets of Eleanor's to get upstairs at all."

"Well, the baskets must be put somewhere," George said firmly, for his senses were coming back to him after the shock of Hilda's suggestion about unpacking. "I don't want them on the stairs. Who put them there?"

"They're waiting for you to decide where they are to go. Do you want them in here?"

"Of course I don't want them in here," he replied indignantly.

"Well, I shall have them put in the garden room *pro tem*," Hilda announced.

"You don't mean my sitting-room, do you?" George asked suspiciously.

"The sitting-room you've taken for yourself, yes."

"I'm certainly not going to have them in there. The whole point of my leaving Halma House was to get a little space," said George. "There were fourteen bicycles in my room at Halma House all last week, and if you think I'm going to have my room here filled up with theatrical baskets, you're mistaken, Hilda."

"But what on earth did Eleanor do with them at Halma House?" she asked.

"We never had them at Halma House at all. They were stored at the Pantechnicon. They're full of old theatrical costumes which were left Eleanor by her father, Joseph Cartwright."

"Well, I shall have them put in the stables until she comes down, and then we can discuss where they are to be stored," Hilda decided.

"That's all right. Put them in the stables. A very good place for them. But why come up here and worry me about where they're to go?"

"And what about your own personal luggage?" she went on.

"I tell you, Eleanor will see to that on Sunday week, I hope."

"But Bertram and Viola's things will want unpacking."

"Well, I can't unpack them, can I?" George asked reproachfully. "Now look here, Hilda, seriously I don't want to be bothered by hearing any more about this ridiculous luggage. I came down here earlier in the week on purpose to get away from luggage. Well, now it has arrived safely, hasn't it? I can't think what you're fussing about."

"Do you realize it's Good Friday to-morrow?" Hilda demanded gravely.

"No, is it?" he said. "Well, what's that got to do with luggage?"

"Only that I refuse to have the hall cluttered up with luggage on Good Friday."

"Well, who's suggesting it should be cluttered up with luggage?" he asked. "You're worrying yourself quite unnecessarily, my dear girl. And now for goodness' sake do go away and let me have a little rest. I've been talking to Hugh about pigs ever since ten o'clock this morning and now you come and worry me about a little thing like luggage."

Hilda turned away in despair.

"I suppose I shall have to sort the trunks out myself."

"I leave it all to you," he said generously. "But if you do happen to come across a pair of thick brown boots belonging to me I'd like to have them. I thought it was rather damp underfoot on the lawn yesterday, and my foot is aching where that beastly dog of James's dropped that boulder on it last night."

Hilda eyed with critical scorn her florid, somewhat gross brother among the bedclothes.

"Really, George, I begin to feel quite sorry for Eleanor," was what she intended for a stinging Parthian shot before she turned away to leave him to his sloth; but the effect was lost, because the door opened as she spoke, and revealed Laurence in a black Norfolk suit and knickerbockers.

"May one come in?" he intoned graciously. "Good morning, George. Good morning, Hilda."

"Where have you come from?" she asked in stonishment.

George could not say anything. He simply lay back mong the pillows, his face working spasmodically.

"Well, I found last night that it was idle for me to emain in London over Easter. So I rose betimes this norning, caught an early train at Waterloo, and bicycled ut from Galton. Rumour had it that you were up here iscussing affairs of state with George; but Edith seemed o think you would be wanting to know that I should be *table* for lunch. The housewife, you know, is always trong in dear Edith. Well, George, I'm surprised to see ou still abed. You ought to be making the most of our Iampshire air. You look a little clogged up, my dear ellow."

George was tempted to unscrew one of the heavy brass nobs from the bedstead and fling it at his brother-in-law.

"But never mind," Laurence went on. "Doctor mbles will soon brace you up. I declare I feel like a iant refreshed already. Yes, yes, George, you ought to o a little gardening every forenoon. A little gentle eeding is what you want. You are clogged up, my dear ellow."

"I think we'd better leave George to dress," Hilda nterposed, not because she was sorry for what her brother as suffering, but because she did not want him to have fit. His mouth was working in such an extraordinary ay, and his face was turning such a very deep red that he really thought he might have one unless he were uickly left alone.

"We'll meet anon, George," said Laurence. "I am ot going to any work until Easter is over, so I shall see omething of you, my dear man. And how are the egetables coming along, Hilda? Huggins is very hopeful bout the early peas, our little Frida tells me."

George began to paw the bedclothes like a high-spirited ull.

"I wish you'd leave me in peace," he muttered thickly.

"Come along, Hilda," Laurence gently urged. "George is on tenterhooks to scramble out of bed, and we are keeping him from this lovely morning air."

As a hippopotamus in a pool, George sank beneath the bedclothes and remained hidden until he heard the door close.

Luckily for his nervous condition he did not see Laurence helping Edith over Eleanor's baskets with kindly exhortations in Latin, such as "excelsior" and "festina lente."

In spite of her brother-in-law's help, or perhaps because of it, Hilda, in leaping across a crevasse to reach the slopes of a Saratoga trunk on the other side, slipped and grazed her shin.

"I wish George and his children and his luggage were a thousand miles from Ambles," she exclaimed bitterly.

"It was certainly pleasanter when there were just you and I and Edith, with little Frida and Harold," Laurence agreed. "I must confess, too, that the way James has installed himself in the library irks me somewhat. One expects something more than a churlish nod when one gives a cheery greeting to one's brother-in-law after bīcȳcling five miles from the railway station by eleven o the clock. Moreover, I cannot accustom myself to the notion that the library is henceforth to be regarded as James's private apartment."

Perhaps there still clung to Laurence some of that priestly discretion which invites feminine confidence, or perhaps it was merely that the graze upon her shin was the little more which is so much. Anyway, she startled Laurence by suddenly turning neolithic and announcing in a voice charged with venom that she was going to take steps to get rid of the whole lot.

Laurence looked round nervously. They were apparently alone in the hall, but there were doors and passages in every direction.. If anybody should hear what Hilda was saying and if anything unpleasant should happen presently he might be involved.

"Come, Hilda," he urged, "these matters are better

discussed *al fresco*. Let us go and visit the early peas, of which little Frida has given me such promising accounts."

"I'm afraid I must go and talk to cook," his sister-in-law told him sharply.

Laurence was by now definitely alarmed. He had recently been so much preoccupied by dramatic situations and devices that anything in the way of outrageous human behaviour had come to seem credible and even likely. He was wondering whether with Hilda in her present mood of vindictiveness the stock-pot might not offer a sudden and irresistible temptation, when her next remark made him reel against the hat-stand.

"If you see Huggins in the garden, Laurence, will you tell him I want the weed-killer?"

"The what?" he asked in a shaky voice.

"The weed-killer," she replied firmly. "I do not want it left about where the children can get at it. I saw it this morning beside the path in the kitchen garden."

Laurence was in a quandary. If he should ask Huggins for the weed-killer and get rid of the tin immediately, while it might prevent Hilda's carrying out her dread purpose this morning, should she later on be suspected of eliminating any of her relations he might easily be regarded as an accomplice. He could already hear the prosecuting counsel's examination of Huggins at the Silchester assizes: '*Did you on the thirteenth—the thirteenth of April, find yourself in the garden at Ambles?*' "*I did.*" "*Did you see anybody that day?*" "*I did.*" "*Whom did you see?*" '*The Reverend Armitage.*" Huggins would be sure to allude to him thus. "*Did Mr. Armitage say anything to you?*" "*He did.*" "*What did he say?*" "*He asked me for a tin of weed-killer.*" *Sensation in Court.* . . . If, on the other hand, he should not ask Huggins for the weed-killer, Hilda might go and fetch it for herself, and in her present mood she might easily empty the whole tin into the soup. Laurence took out a handkerchief and passed it across his high white forehead. This horrible business must at all costs be prevented. Popular prejudice would

be strongly against him after his controversy with the Bishop of Silchester about the Virgin Birth. People would say that a clergyman who was capable of resigning his living and going on the stage was capable of doing the worst with a tin of weed-killer.

While these thoughts were darting through Laurence's brain more swiftly than James's dragon-flies in life had hawked through the air for gnats, Hilda had already set out for the kitchen. As in a dream Laurence heard her voice, before she vanished into the corridor which linked it with the rest of the house, repeat :

" Don't forget about the weed-killer, will you ? "

With these words ringing in his ears he rushed wildly into the open air, stumbling over George's hat-box as he rushed. He roamed about the common for some time, and when he got back to the house he found Hilda busy trying to unpack the clothes of her nephew and niece. Edith was just vanishing upstairs with a bundle in her arms.

" George's laziness is perfectly unnatural," Hilda came up from a trunk to bubble at him. " He ought to be boiled alive. Did you ask Huggins for that weed-killer, Laurence ? "

" You don't want it now, do you ? " he demurred as suavely as he could.

" Yes, I do want it now," she snapped. " Lunch will be ready before I know what I'm doing, and Bertram and Viola have just snatched some of those absurd tawdry costumes that Eleanor encourages them to wear. They'll be chasing poor little Harold presently, and I want that tin of weed-killer. If you can't find it, I'll go and find it myself," she finished in an access of irritation as the lid of the trunk she was unpacking came down on her head.

Laurence left her hurriedly to go in search of the weed-killer. He crossed the lawn and entered the red-walled kitchen garden through the gate wrought of iron in a beautiful design. Once he had looked back over his shoulder ; and at the head of that expanse of lawn the mellow straggling old house, so calm and so genial, began

o appear a fit setting for one of Massinger's sombre dramas
r for the bloodstained horrors of Webster.

The kitchen garden was apparently empty. That was
omething, Laurence thought, as he walked along the
vide central path, seeing not the daffodils in their glory
long the borders, marking not the first flush of colour
n the green buds of the Darwin tulips, but searching
verywhere for that tin of weed-killer. There was no sign
f it. Yet Hilda had distinctly told him that she had
oticed it beside the path in the kitchen-garden only this
norning. He turned round into one of the side paths,
nd he had not walked twenty yards in this direction
vhen he thought he saw something among the blossoms
f a pear-tree growing against the wall. He quickened
is steps and was rewarded by the sight of a tin
apered with vivid green, on which was printed in large
etters WALPOLE'S WONDERFUL WEED-KILLER.
aurence's heart leapt for joy. He stepped lightly
cross the intervening border where various tender
egetables were enjoying their babyhood on this fine
pring morning. He grasped the green tin and was
ust about to step back as lightly as before into the path,
vhen the voice of Harold close at hand startled him so
nuch that he plunged instead into a bed of seedling
arrots and obliterated hundreds of the poor little things.

"Those aren't weeds, uncle Laurence. They're carrots,"
Harold informed him.

"I am aware of that, my boy," said Laurence as suavely
s the shock of his nephew's sudden arrival allowed. "I
m something of a gardener myself, you know."

"I thought you thought they were weeds, because you
vere stamping on them. Are you going to kill some weeds,
ncle Laurence?" he asked, eyeing the tin with as much
appy excitement as though it were a regiment with fixed
ayonets.

"No, no, Harold, I have no intention of killing anything
n this beautiful morning. On such a morning even the
umblest weed can teach us something."

"What can it teach us, uncle Laurence?"

"Why, it can give us an—insight—into the—ah—wonders of creation, my boy."

"Well, why did you go and get the weed-killer?"

"Oh, I just saw it there," said Laurence, "and I thought it might be wanted—I mean that it might not be wanted—where it was, that is. And whence did you spring?" he continued, partly to change the subject, but partly because he really was anxious to know how Harold had managed to appear as silently as an earthworm wriggling up from the bowels of the earth.

"I was hiding in the tool-shed, uncle Laurence."

"Oh, I see. A little game of play, eh?"

"No, I was hiding from Bertram. Huggins told me he was coming after me again dressed up as an Indian. So I ran as fast as I could and hid under a sack in the tool-shed. But I'm not frightened of Bertram now."

"That's right," said his uncle cheerfully.

"And I won't eat any of that weed-killer, uncle Laurence," he volunteered after a brief pause.

"I should hope you wouldn't, indeed."

"Because mother said it was frightfully poisonous."

Laurence jumped.

"Your mother is quite right."

"Is that why it kills weeds?"

"That is why without doubt."

"How much would I have to eat for it to kill me?" Harold asked, his spectacles playing round the tin his uncle was carrying as sunbeams illuminate the funereal emblems on some dusty tomb.

"I don't know how much," Laurence replied. "It is an experiment nobody ought to make."

"If it would kill people," Harold went on, "perhaps it would kill butterflies, uncle Laurence?"

"Perhaps it would."

"I saw a female Brimstone just now."

Laurence jumped again. In her present mood Harold might have been referring to his mother.

"Where are you going to take that tin, uncle Laurence?" Harold resumed.

"I'm not going to take it anywhere," his uncle replied a little sharply.

"Well, why are you carrying it?"

"Because I like carrying it."

"Why? Is it nice to carry?"

"It's neither nice nor nasty."

"Isn't it?" said Harold doubtfully.

"I just happened to see this tin in the pear-tree, and thinking it looked a little untidy I decided I would put it somewhere."

"Well, where are you going to put it?"

"I've not made up my mind, yet. Really, my boy, I do not understand why the fortunes of this two-pound tin of weed-killer should occupy your mind to the exclusion of all else this morning. At your age I should have been bounding about on such a glorious day."

"Well, if I do, cousin Bertram will run after me in his Indian dress," said Harold in woebegone accents; and then he suddenly clutched his uncle's sleeve. "I can hear him now. It's his war-whoop. He makes it with his finger in his mouth."

Harold stood panting with apprehension. Not otherwise may some early settler in America have looked when he heard afar the war-whoops of the Choctaw or the Iroquois.

"I'll have to go and hide again," he said sadly.

"Well, perhaps you had better," Laurence agreed.

And Harold, after darting at his uncle a reproachful look through his spectacles, fled to the shelter of the tool-shed again.

Laurence, much relieved by his nephew's departure, hid the tin of weed-killer under his Norfolk jacket and quickened his steps toward the house. When he was half-way across the lawn, a small figure dressed in the attire of a Red Indian brave scuttled along bent nearly double and disappeared into the shrubbery on the right. A few seconds

later something struck Laurence a sharp blow between the shoulder-blades. On looking round to see what it was, he perceived lying on the lawn at his feet an arrow. He sniffed severely at the prostrate missile before he bent over to pick it up and slip it into his pocket, whence the feathered head peeped out like a timid tropical nestling.

The war-whoop of the Indians was suddenly hushed.

"Good lummy, I hit him," Running Stag was murmuring in amazement to the dusky Indian maid crouching beside him in the shelter of a purple-leaved plum.

"We'd better bunk," said the dusky maid.

So the raiders bunked back across the twenty-acre prairie to more distant hunting-grounds.

But Laurence held on his way indoors. He should not feel happy until Walpole's Wonderful Weed-killer was safely hidden in his own study. Unluckily for his peace of mind his wife was up there, putting all straight for him to begin work whenever he wanted.

"I have abandoned any idea of working until Easter is over, Edith," he told her. "So that there is no need for your thoughtful little attentions just at this moment."

But Edith, instead of retiring from the room, sat down gratefully in an arm-chair.

"How lovely, Laurence, that you're going to take a little rest! How nice that you were able to get down here after all! Little Frida was in transports."

"I asked Hilda to put forward lunch a quarter of an hour. I broke fast very early this morning."

"I'm sure you must have, dear."

"I told you about lunch," Laurence pressed, "because I thought you might want to wash your hands or something."

"There's plenty of time, dear. It's only a little after half-past twelve. I'm quite enjoying this little rest. I helped poor Hilda unpack some of the children's things. She was worrying about the lunch."

"What?" Laurence asked in a hollow voice.

"Oh, quite unnecessarily. There's plenty for everybody. But apparently something had gone wrong with the stock-pot."

Laurence stared at his wife, his beautifully chiselled lips gaping like a pair of pincers.

"Did you taste it?" he stammered.

"No, but cook said it tasted very odd. In fact she could not recognize the flavour at all until she examined the stock more carefully, and then the murder was out . . ."

"The murder?" Laurence echoed faintly.

"Yes, for what do you think? In some extraordinary way an old boot had managed to get into the stock."

"An old boot?"

"Well, we think it was old; but of course the heat of the fire and the ingredients may have given it an old look. Cook said it gave a really most peculiar flavour to the stock. Of course it all had to be thrown away. And though James's dog sniffed at the boot, it seemed to frighten him, for he backed away from it growling, and his hairs were all bristling. Hilda thinks it must have been either Bertram or Viola who put the boot in the stock-pot, because cook says that she had some trouble with them early this morning."

Laurence felt less sure of the children's guilt, but he thought it wiser to accept the general theory.

"They are undoubtedly a very mischievous young couple," he agreed. "But their father should set them an example of rising earlier."

"Oh, I think the children get up early enough," said Edith. "In fact Bertram peeped into my room soon after six this morning."

"I fancy it was Master Bertram who hit me in the back just now with this arrow," said Laurence, pulling the weapon from his pocket as deftly as an American business man pulls out his gaudily decorated fountain-pen

"My dear!"

Edith jumped up from her chair to see if he was badly

hurt, and as she tenderly and cautiously slid her hand down his back she cried out in alarm :

" Laurence ! It's given you a most dreadful bruise."

Laurence sedately shook himself free from her solicitude.

" My dear, do not exaggerate. It was not a violent blow."

" But, Laurence, really, I felt it. It's a large lump on your side."

" Nonsense," he said as testily as if he were reproving a choir-boy for coming in at the wrong bar. " That's a packet of—of—ah—manuscript."

" But really, Laurence, it couldn't be. It's sticking out in a sharp point from your back. I'm afraid they've broken a rib."

Laurence sank deep into an arm-chair and leaned back as hard as he could against the weed-killer.

" Please do not agitate yourself, my dear. I am surely in a better position than you to know whether I have a broken rib or not."

Edith fluttered round her husband's chair, trying to get at that bruise ; but he defended it as a hen defends her young, until at last the gong sounded for lunch.

" Now, you'll be late," he said severely. " And I warned you to go and get ready earlier."

" I wish you'd come and let me bathe it with warm water and boracic," Edith turned to say reproachfully before she left him alone.

Laurence rose quickly and was just going to lock the weed-killer in his bureau when Harold's glasses popped round the door like the lamps of a car swiftly turning a corner, and he had to thrust the tin hastily back under his jacket.

" Lunch is ready, uncle Laurence," Harold announced gleefully. " And I can't see cousin Bertram or cousin Viola anywhere. Won't they be late ? But I'm not late."

" Run along, Harold," said his uncle, " I shall follow hard upon your heels."

" Are you going to wash your hands, uncle Laurence ? "

" No, no."

"Well, the gong has gone. So, hadn't you better come down?"

Laurence made one attempt to hustle his nephew from the room; but he had no sooner done so and opened the lid of his bureau than round the corner those spectacles darted once again.

Laurence dropped the lid of the bureau with a crash and faced Harold sternly.

"What do you want now?" he demanded.

"Mother said I could show you my dear father's humming-birds after we'd all had lunch, uncle Laurence."

Laurence gave up and followed his nephew downstairs to the dining-room.

Lunch had been in progress for a quarter of an hour before Bertram and Viola appeared with Hugh. An attempt was made to crush them for their unpunctuality; but Hugh was easily able to demonstrate that they would have been punctual if lunch had not been put forward a quarter of an hour without warning them. Moreover, Hugh himself presently launched a strong offensive.

"What a ghastly stench there is in this room!" he exclaimed, putting a handkerchief to his nose.

"Well, I thought there was rather a queer smell about," said James.

"Rather? Pouf! It's absolutely appalling," Hugh declared.

"That dog of yours has probably left a dead rat or something under the sideboard," George put in sullenly.

Laurence had been acutely aware of this smell for some time; but, attributing it to the effect of a warm room on the weed-killer, he had said nothing about it, and he said nothing about it now. Beatrice, much offended at the charge against Beyle, jumped up to investigate underneath the sideboard; but in passing near Laurence's place at the table she stopped to exclaim that the odour was overpowering at this end of the room and that she had never in her life smelt anything so strong.

Laurence had an impression that she was accusing him.

He shrank away from her. The tin of weed-killer seemed to throb guiltily under his Norfolk jacket.

And then Beatrice leapt forward like a bloodhound.

"It's either something on Laurence's coat," she bayed, "or something on Harold's. It's simply fearful just here."

Laurence was so much startled by her sudden dive towards him that he lost control of his elbow, and the tin of weed-killer fell with a crash on the floor. And the annoying thing was that the smell was finally brought home to Harold, who from having spent about an hour hiding in the tool-house under two empty sacks which had contained bone meal was now permeated through and through by the vile odour.

But as he was being led out by his mother to change his clothes the wretched boy cried:

"Uncle Laurence, uncle Laurence, you've dropped your weed-killer which you put under your jacket. I'll get it for you."

With this, he plunged under the table and emerged with the tin.

"You asked me to bring you the—ah—weed-killer, Hilda," said Laurence. "You'd better give the tin to your mother, Harold."

A silence fell upon the luncheon table, a silence which was only broken by the snorts of Beyle, to whose congested nostrils the smell had at last penetrated and who was now nosing about the dining-room in search of it.

CHAPTER VII

EASTER EGGS

LAURENCE was much affected by the incident of the weed-killer. The idea that Hilda was trying o poison her relations was, he told himself, an absurd ightmare fancy. But if the incredible, the inconceivable, vere in this case true? In what a ghastly position he night find himself. Any murder by poisoning was absurd gainst a respectable background, and yet most of the reat poison dramas had been played in an ordinary nterior. Apart from any possible use of weed-killer lunch hat day had been somewhat indigestible, and Laurence's orty winks were disturbed by such visions as haunted the leep of distinguished villains like Macbeth and Richard he Third. If he had seen Hilda wandering round the ouse in a nightdress of nun's veiling and trying to ob- terate from her fingers the guilty green marks, he would ave believed his own eyes. Nor was his vanity entirely nfretted by the prospect of having his name linked with Hilda in a *cause célèbre*.

"May one disturb your labours for a few moments, ames?" he inquired later that afternoon, when he found is brother-in-law at work in the library.

"I suppose so," the man of letters grumbled.

"And who is the master?" Laurence inquired as he ightly inclined his head with a smile of condescension oward the book James was reading.

"It's a life of the Marquise de Brinvilliers," James told m. "Better than the average criminal biography."

"The Marquise . . . the . . . in fact the—ah—poisoner?"

"Queer case," said James, putting the volume down on his knee. "But I think all this mystery about the poison she used is so much nonsense. It was probably nothing but arsenic. Arsenic is the standard venom. So easy to get hold of. And nowadays easier than ever. Why, I'll wager that tin of weed-killer you were carrying about with you is full of it. The part of the Marquise's story that interests me is that of her accomplice Sainte-Croix. How did he really come to that bad end?"

"He came to a bad end, did he? I'd forgotten that. Poor wight. . . . I mean to say, did he? Well, I just looked in, James, to find out if you felt tempted by the prospect of a turn . . . a brief turn in the garden?"

"No thanks, I hate conventional exercise," said James, picking up his book again.

"Then I think I'll leave you," said Laurence. "I feel I rather want a little fresh air."

Of course, it may have been a coincidence, Laurence told himself as he made his way toward the garden, but it was surely an extraordinary coincidence. Why should James be studying a book about a female poisoner to-day? And speculating about her accomplice?

In the stable-yard he came across Hugh, who was busy over measurements.

"Projects, Hugh?" he intoned.

"I'm planning out the Chamber of Horrors."

"The what?"

"This museum for Daniel Curtis's humming-birds and James's dragon-flies. Don't you remember Johnnie offered to provide fifty pounds for it? I thought he was joking. But apparently he was serious. Anyway, the solicitors have notified James that the money is available. So I thought I'd better turn an honest ten guineas by planning out the job."

"Quite so indeed," Laurence agreed with the slightly excessive cordiality of one who feels that he may be needing

friend shortly. "And is Hilda pleased at the notion of housing her little charges adequately?"

"Hilda pleased?" Hugh jeered. "Did you ever know Hilda when she was pleased about anything?"

"You think she's apt to be overstrained just now?" Laurence suggested.

"Yes, if you call a rotten bad temper overstrain."

"She is perhaps a little hasty on occasions," Laurence agreed.

"On occasions?" Hugh echoed sardonically. "Why, she'd poison the lot of us if she had the chance."

"But I assure you, my dear man, she only wanted me to find that weed-killer for reasons of domestic safety. She feared lest one of the children might be tempted to essay the noxious powder. Children are so liable to indulge themselves in an indiscreet curiosity. No, no, Hugh, it was nothing more than a domestic precaution which we should all applaud."

Hugh paused from his measurements to fix his brother-in-law with a shrewd mirthful glance mingled with contempt. Laurence's nervousness had given him an idea.

"I think if I were you, Lorenzo," he said, "I should go a bit slow. It might be awkward for you if Hilda took it into her head that you were giving her away. Hell knows no Fury, and all that, you know."

"But you don't really think . . ." Laurence stammered.

"Why not?" his brother-in-law interrupted quickly. "All I know is that if I were you I should make a keen scrutiny of every mouthful I ate and every drop I drank. There's one thing," he added hopefully, "the taste of weed-killer is absolutely unmistakable."

"What does the stuff taste of?"

"Well, it's difficult to convey such an unique flavour in a comparison."

"I suppose it might be bitter?" Laurence suggested. "Arsenic, I fancy, is bitter."

"That's right," said Hugh with enthusiasm. "Bitter's

the very word! A kind of cross between the fag-end of a bad cigar, the juice of a lemon, and an English greengage. If you taste anything like that in your food, Lorenzo, old man, you spit it out. Don't think about your table manners. Just spit it right out."

"I certainly should," said Laurence.

"Of course," Hugh went on, "you mustn't trust too long to her using weed-killer. She'll try something more subtle presently. I tell you what, Lorenzo: if I were you, I'd test all my food on Beyle first."

"On Beyle?"

"Yes, just offer him a morsel of any dish which has roused your suspicion, and if Beyle immediately goes into convulsions followed by black vomit, coma, and death, you'd better wait for the next course."

"I certainly should," said Laurence earnestly.

"Or you might offer a bit from your plate to Harold," Hugh went on. "And then you'd know by Hilda's agonized maternal shriek that what was sauce for the goose wasn't sauce for the gander, figuratively speaking, of course."

"But Harold might swallow the morsel before he was stopped," Laurence pointed out.

"He probably would," Hugh agreed. "That's what I was thinking."

"But, my dear Hugh, surely you wouldn't wish to involve an innocent child in the consequences of a temporary aberration on the part of his mother?"

"Well, if you feel you can't forget that you were a clergyman until recently, I dare say it would be enough to dangle the morsel in front of Harold's mouth. He's bound to make a gulp at it, and that'll set his mother off screaming."

"But, my dear Hugh," Laurence asked very seriously, "ought we to assume that Hilda is capable of . . . of . . . behaving like this?"

"It's nothing to do with me," Hugh disclaimed. "I knew nothing about her game with the weed-killer til

ou warned me about it. Don't try to drag me into it at is hour."

Laurence raised a tranquillizing hand.

"I have no wish to drag you into it, Hugh. I regret at I ever gave you the impression I was definitely sus- ecting Hilda of being capable of such a monstrous deed. little calm reflection out of doors has put a different spect on matters. I beg you will consider this little iscussion a secret. I shall not mention a word of it to nybody else."

"Just as you like," said the younger man. "But if ilda guesses you've spotted her game, I advise you to ok out for yourself, that's all. It's you I'm worrying out. She can't do anything to the rest of us until she's ther squared you or snuffed you out altogether. But if e squares you, you might remember the advice I gave ou, and let me have a quiet tip not to gobble my dinner o fast that fatal evening."

"Hugh, really, even humorously I must beg you not to ggest that I am capable of—ah—being squared over ch an atrocious project. I hope I am broad-minded, t . . ."

'Well, look here, Lorenzo, if you don't mind," the chitect interrupted. "I want to get on with my plans r housing these humming-birds. I can't afford to throw way a ten-guinea fee to give you advice which you don't tend to take."

"But I assure you, my dear fellow, I am most grateful you. I only wish to suggest that we should not assume o much. I shall keep my eyes open . . ."

"You'd be safer if you kept your mouth shut," Hugh terposed sharply.

"I intend to keep it firmly shut on the subject of this rrible—ah—I really cannot bring myself to call it even a ssibility."

"That's all right, Lorenzo. But all the same I should ep a jug of mustard and water handy. A prompt netic will be the surest protection. In fact should you

feel even a trace of what you would ordinarily suppose was middle-aged repletion after a hearty meal, if you're wise you'll lose no time in getting outside that mustard and water. There's one comfort about weed-killer, you'll be sure to taste it before you get a big dose. Now if it was summer and Hilda could make a decoction from fly-papers, you might feel more nervous. I'm told you can drink quite a lot of boiled-down fly-papers before you notice you're not drinking cheap burgundy."

"You are opening up some dark corners, Hugh," said his brother-in-law with a sigh.

"Yes, it's no good housing humming-birds unless you let the light in on their plumage."

Laurence smiled sadly.

"I was speaking in parables, my dear fellow."

But Hugh had mounted to the top of the ladder against the wall of the stables by this time and made no reply. So Laurence, with a slow shaking of his head, passed on to lighten his thoughts by contemplating the innocent green of the young peas whose forwardness was Huggins's pride. He had not long left the stable-yard when Harold came into it, his glasses darting vigilantly hither and thither like the bull's-eye of a policeman on the track of an unbolted door. He soon saw his uncle on the ladder measuring for the new window, at the foot of which he stood gazing up at him, his hands clasped earnestly behind his back in a rapture of curiosity.

"Are you measuring, uncle Hugh?" he inquired at last.

Hugh, whose thoughts had been concentrated upon the best way to take advantage of Laurence's nervousness, jumped at the sound of that sleek voice and the ladder twanged like the strings of a double-bass.

"I'll come down and measure you for a strait-jacket, you little donkey," he threatened. "Don't you know better than to interrupt somebody standing on a ladder?"

"Well, I didn't know you might fall off," Harold urged in self-defence. "Mother said you were measuring for my museum. And she says that curators aren't smacked

So I am going to be a curator. And Huggins is going to give me a big shell which his grandfather found. Are you glad, uncle Hugh ? "

" Oh, my god," Hugh moaned, swaying on the ladder like an acrobat with colic.

" Mind you don't fall, uncle Hugh," his nephew implored anxiously. " Because I'm not strong enough to hold the ladder for you, even if I try ever so hard."

Hugh stumbled down to the ground somehow and leaned against the wall of the stables in a dazed condition.

" Who on earth taught you to talk like that ? " he murmured faintly. " How do you do it ? "

" Do what ? "

" Talk like that."

" Do I ? "

" Harold, aren't you ever afraid at night that somebody will come up to your room and smother you in your sleep ? "

" Could anybody ? " the wretched Harold asked anxiously. Then he pulled himself together and said stoutly, " Well, I've got my air-gun. And I've got the club my dear father brought me back from the Amazon."

" But, my good lad, you'd be smothered before you could get out of bed to use either."

" Would I ? " the boy quavered. Then he rallied again. ' Well, I could call out for somebody to come."

" My child, how could you call out with half a bolster inside your mouth ? "

" Well, I don't think anybody would come and smother me," said Harold, a strong tremolo now perceptible in his voice.

" Wouldn't they ! " his uncle exclaimed. " Don't you believe it. I should estimate there were about twenty people waiting for the chance every night."

" You *are* teasing me, aren't you, uncle Hugh ? Mother said I mustn't mind when I'm teased."

" Teasing you ? Of course I'm not teasing you."

" I could tell a policeman," Harold suggested.

"No good at all. What's one policeman going to do against twenty people waiting outside in the garden every night for a chance to climb up the drain-pipe outside your bedroom and smother you?"

"Well, what can I do?" the miserable child asked, his countenance sicklied over with apprehension.

"The best thing you can do is to ask your uncle Laurence if he'd mind your tying a string to his toe so that you could pull it in the night and wake him up to rescue you."

Harold pondered this method of protection for a moment.

"Couldn't I tie a string to mother's toe, and then she could wake up everybody else?"

"Well, never mind about that just now," said Hugh suddenly. "What's the bitterest thing you know?"

"Sour apples."

"What else?"

Harold thought for a while.

"Bitter aloes."

Hugh offered his hand.

"Shake hands, Harold, and don't worry too much about these people waiting to smother you. I'll see they don't do it for a long time yet. You're too valuable."

"Mother put bitter aloes on my fingers to stop me biting my nails."

"And you found them really bitter?"

Harold made a wry grimace and nodded vigorously.

"Thanks very much, Harold, for your entertaining conversation; but, if you don't mind, I'd rather you went away now, because I want to get on with my work."

"And I must go and get on with my work, uncle Hugh."

"What's your work?"

"I'm reading 'Homes without Hands' for a holiday task. And when I've read it, mother says I may have an ants' nest in a glass case so that I can observe the habits of ants in my own little room."

"Well, the habits of uncles will take a bit of observing my son, if you start bringing ants into the house."

Harold wandered off to study Lubbock's fat green volume about ants, bees, and wasps, while Hugh resumed his measurements. He hummed to himself over his work as gaily as one of the subjects of Harold's holiday task, for he was thinking that with the help of bitter aloes he ought to be able to frighten Laurence out of Ambles in less than a fortnight. And of course if Laurence went, Edith and Frida would go with him. That would be a fifth of the house vacant. Then Hilda would have to be tackled. It was going to be a job to get rid of her; but it could be done, and it should be done. Could it be done with bitter aloes? Could Hilda be persuaded that Laurence was trying to poison her? Hugh shook his head. No, no. Bertram's friend Higginbotham was the *deus ex machina* for Hilda, and that meant waiting till the summer holidays. Still, Rome wasn't built in a day and Ambles could not be depopulated in the same short time. The elimination of Hilda was going to be difficult enough; but, by the way James was settling down in that library, the elimination of James was going to be even more difficult. No amount of bitter aloes in James's food was going to shift him out of that library. He might grumble at Hilda's housekeeping perhaps, but he would not budge. Besides, he had been used to bad food for so many years now in furnished rooms that he might not even notice that his meals were being flavoured with bitter aloes. Yes, the shifting of James was going to be a very difficult problem. The only things that James really disliked were successful men, and he was as free from them at Ambles as anywhere, now that Johnnie had given it up. However, it was no good being pessimistic. Some way of getting rid of James would present itself, and as long as they were all out by the end of the summer, which would give time to get the necessary alterations made during the autumn and winter, there was no reason why Ambles should not open as an hotel by next Easter.

On Saturday morning Hugh drove into Galton and bought at the chemist's a packet of bitter aloes. No

time was to be wasted over the process of terrifying Laurence into leaving the house.

"And yet," said Hugh to himself, "I might be making a mistake in getting rid of Laurence first. Merely by keeping him there and encouraging his idiocy, the others might be driven into evacuating Ambles in order to escape from him.

"What did you say, uncle Hugh," asked Viola, who had driven in with him.

"I was talking to myself."

"Well, I heard all you said."

"Why ask me what I said then?"

"Because I didn't know if you were talking to me. When I was going to my dancing class once in a bus with Miss Coldwell, there was a man opposite who was talking to himself, and Miss Coldwell said he was mad; but I don't think he was, because when he got out he put out his tongue at Miss Coldwell and told her she had a face like a wet jujube."

"And had she?"

"Well, it wasn't very wet," Viola said, "except when she was hot. Aren't you glad it's Easter Sunday to-morrow?"

"Not particularly. Why should I be?"

"Because we'll have to look for our eggs at breakfast. I hope I'll find an orange one this year. Last year I found a pink one, and so I did the year before, but I can't remember what colour it was the year before. Bertram found a purple one last year. But it was cracked, because mother forgot which cushion she'd hid it under and father sat on it before Bertram found it. He got rather waxy, because we kept asking him to get out of the chair he was sitting in to look underneath to see if there was an egg. He said it was the most damned confounded fidgety nonsense he ever heard of looking for Easter eggs."

"I suppose all this talk about Easter eggs is to remind me of my duty as an uncle?" Hugh asked.

"Well, it was rather," his niece admitted.

So Hugh took her into the confectioner's and bought an immense affair full of chocolate creams, an Easter egg which would have made the most eligible ostrich think seriously of remaining a bachelor girl.

"But you'll have to hand this round," he warned her. "Don't go and guzzle the whole lot with Bertram before to-morrow."

The morning of Easter Sunday roused a sharp discussion among the owners of Ambles. The trouble was that, whereas nobody wanted to go to church, everybody thought that somebody ought to represent the household at the service always held on great festivals in the little chapel-of-ease which was really an appendage of Braxted Hall, one of the great Palladian houses in the neighbourhood. James said he could not go because he never went to church. Laurence said he could not go because he could not attend a place of worship hardly five miles from his old parish of Newton Candover without implying a criticism of his predecessor, which he was not anxious to do. George took no part in the discussion, for he regarded it as self-evident that he could not go. Beatrice said she should have liked to go, but that the last time she had taken the path across the fields to church she had been followed all the way by cows. Edith did not see how she could go without calling attention to Laurence's absence. Hilda said it was impossible for her to go without upsetting the household arrangements: the new cook, if called upon to deal with the Easter dinner of roast lamb without her presence, might give notice. Hugh said he could not go because smoking was forbidden in church and he could not face the prospect of a long service unrelieved by a single cigarette.

The eyes of all the grown-ups were turned upon the children. It was felt that those gaily-coloured eggs which had been hidden for them and which they had found with such ease and eaten with such relish for breakfast should now be paid for.

"And it will be a jolly walk for them," one of the grown-ups said with a glance at the cold world outside the warm dining-room.

"Though they must not loiter," observed another, "for the wind is in the east this morning."

"And blowing quite hard," a third added, turning back with a shiver from the view of the wind-whipped country-side to the crackling fire.

Viola made an attempt to postpone the start by handing round her large egg in an access of polite generosity. She was thanked; but nobody seemed inclined to eat such very large chocolate creams so soon after breakfast, and her aunt Hilda, who seemed to suspect her of a design to carry the egg to church and munch her way through prayers, suggested that the egg had better be left in her keeping until after lunch.

"Well, I'd rather give it to uncle Hugh to look after," Viola objected. "Because, if you keep it, Harold will find it, and there won't be any chocolates left."

"Viola, I do not intend to be spoken to in that insolent fashion by a child of your age," her aunt said angrily. "Give me that egg at once."

Viola clasped the egg to her as passionately as if she had laid it herself.

"It's my egg," she argued. "I can give it to who I like."

"To whom I like, Viola," Laurence interposed gently. "Even the most attractive Easter egg should not make us forget our grammar."

"Viola, give me that egg immediately," Hilda commanded.

"But it's mine," her niece still demurred.

"Viola, are you defying me?" Hilda inquired grandly.

"Yes."

Hilda looked round at the assembled family to solicit their attention for the behaviour of this abandoned child.

"What do you want the egg for so particularly?"

Hugh asked, with so much of the prosecuting council n his tone that Laurence jumped.

"That's right, I thought you would encourage her," aid Hilda bitterly. "George, I appeal to you. Will ou insist on Viola's handing over that egg to me."

"I'm sick to death of Easter eggs," George declared. Every year we have this confounded business with ggs. These religious festivals are an absolute pest."

"Well, I'll give my egg to uncle Hugh, but I won't ive it to aunt Hilda," Viola declared firmly.

With this she hurriedly deposited the egg on Hugh's ap and retired to put on her things for church, followed alf-way upstairs by the scolding voice of her aunt.

"Queer thing Hilda should be so keen to get hold of his egg," Hugh observed in a low voice to Laurence. I must keep an eye on it. Do you remember the Lamson ase?"

"No, what was that?"

"Well, Lamson poisoned his nephew with aconite in a iece of plum cake. But of course chocolates have always een a famous medium. I hope Hilda hasn't been messing bout with this egg already. I found her staring at it ery curiously this morning."

"Hush, hush, my dear fellow, do not say such things," aurence begged uneasily.

The children's walk to church that morning was not as xhilarating as the sharp wind should have made it. erhaps it was that the prospect of the long service before hem weighed their spirits down.

"I hope they won't have the Litany," Bertram sighed, hen they were half-way to Braxted.

And the gloomy silence that succeeded this re- nark expressed better than words what they were all eeling.

"Cavé!" he called out a few minutes later. "I think hose cows are going to follow us."

They quickened their steps; but, as always on such ccasions, the cows quickened their steps too.

"Look out, you ass," Bertram exclaimed to Harold. "Don't run, or the cows will start running too."

But the admonition was too late; Harold had started running. And there was nothing for it except to run with him. The four of them reached a sundering gate exactly ten seconds before a dozen cows arrived on the other side of it, all with their tails in the air and breathing heavily.

"Pouf!" Viola ejaculated at Harold in scorn. "A fine explorer you'll make. Explorers don't run even from lions."

"Well, asplorers have guns," Harold argued.

"Yes, and babies have bottles," Bertram jeered.

"You ran too," Harold pointed out, his lips beginning to droop with mortification.

"No, I didn't, you liar."

"I'm not a liar."

"Yes, you are. You're the biggest liar that ever was. Isn't he, V?" Bertram insisted.

"Much the biggest," a devoted sister agreed.

"But you did run when Harold ran," Frida suggested in a compassionate attempt to secure justice for the miserable Harold.

"Yes, but I told him not to run," Bertram reminded her. "It was Harold who was funky of the cows; it wasn't me."

"I wasn't funky of them," he expostulated. "I thought they might come after Frida and Viola."

"Well, if you aren't funky," Bertram challenged, "I dare you to climb back over the gate and stand there while I count thirty."

"We'll be late for church if I do," Harold objected.

"You are a funk!" Bertram taunted. "You are a funk!"

"A dirty little funk," Viola echoed.

"Well, if you're so brave," Harold said, "why don't you climb back, Bertram?"

"Because I don't stink like you," Bertram retorted.

" Ha-ha ! " Viola cried, clapping her hands in triumphant appreciation of the crushing logic of her brother's reply, though the logic of it might have escaped some.

Harold's answer was to put his head down and rush desperately on toward the sound of the cracked bell in the little chapel-of-ease which was clanging thinly upon the acid air of this grey April morning.

" He'll be frightfully puffed when he gets to the church door," Bertram commented in a tone of disgusted superiority.

The congregation in the chapel-of-ease was chiefly composed of the members of the house-party at Braxted Hall, who between them had managed to appropriate most of the hassocks. Besides such quality there were one or two farmers and a dozen or so labourers with their wives and families. The officiating clergyman was the junior curate of Galton Parish Church, a small man with a heavy cold who was even more out of breath than Harold, having burst his tyre on the way out and having had, in consequence, to leave his bicycle behind a hedge and walk the last two miles in extreme haste of body and agitation of mind.

The poor little man looked worn out when he ascended the varnished pulpit to preach his sermon, for the service advertised as Choral Matins had devolved almost entirely upon him, the choir being too much interested in the house-party of Braxted Hall to sing with that fervour the joyful holiday demanded. They were not likely to get such an opportunity of studying the queer habits of the gentry till Whitsun, and they did not mean to let it slip. The little man's fatigue would have prevented the sermon's being long in any case, but if he had intended to be discursive, the way Colonel Buntle, the owner of the Hall, looked at his watch when he announced the text would have checked him.

The sermon came to an end. A man with an impassive and crimson face handed round the bag. The children one by one inserted their pennies ; and then as the bag

was being given back to the impassive sidesman by Bertram, who had collared the outside of the pew, Harold, who was on the inside, emitted an agonized cry which rang out above the lackadaisical Alleluia of the choir and congregation just then being sung.

"My medal!" he groaned to Frida. "I've put my medal in the bag by mistake."

"His medal," Frida whispered to Viola. "He's put his medal in the bag."

"What medal?" Viola asked.

"What medal, Harold?" Frida whispered to her distracted cousin.

"My medal I won for the best essay on British Butterflies by boys under twelve in the *Boy's Own Paper*," Harold muttered, as he plunged along the pew to intercept the sidesman before he placed the bag on the brass almsdish that a shiny-faced sheepish choir-boy was holding out for him at the top of the chancel steps.

"Get back, you little ass," Bertram growled. "You're making everybody look round to stare at us."

But Harold paid no heed. He pressed eagerly forward, tripped over Bertram's forbidding leg, and landed on his face in the middle of the aisle with such a bump that even the impassive sidesman was startled into looking back over his shoulder and Colonel Buntle actually stood on one of the Braxted Hall hassocks in order to survey the prostrate Harold with a cold blue military eye. The situation was too much for Bertram's self-consciousness.

"Come on," he muttered to his sister, "let's get out of church and bunk."

So they hurried from the pew, where Frida, finding herself deserted and alone, burst into tears. Nor did they pause to comment on the disastrous scene until they had put a mile of green country between them and the chapel-of-ease. Then Bertram flung himself down on the grass beneath an immemorial elm and invited Viola to tell him whether she had ever in her life been made to feel such an ass.

"Never," she affirmed positively.

"I felt I was turning red all over," he told her. "Did look frightfully red?"

"Not frightfully," she assured him. "Not as red as at man with the bag."

A gentle cooing in the branches of the elm above lulled ertram's fever of embarrassment to forgetfulness.

"I say, I bet there's a pigeon's nest up there."

"I bet there is, too," Viola agreed encouragingly.

"Do you dare me to shin up and see?" he asked.

"Well, I dare you," she said dutifully.

Bertram, by standing on his sister's back, managed to asp the lowest branch and swing himself up. There as a lot of crackling as he gained the heart of the mighty ee, then an excited flutter of wings, followed by Bertram's ice from far away.

"Two eggs!"

"Only take one, Bertram," she begged with feminine mpathy for the maternal pigeon.

There was no answer, and she divined that he was escending with the egg in his mouth. The crackling gan again, to be succeeded by a rending swishing sound d the sudden appearance of Bertram on the ground at r feet, his fingers pulling the most loathsome-looking uff from his mouth.

"Have you knocked some of your teeth out?" she ked anxiously.

"No, it was a hard-set egg, you ass. It broke in my outh, and then I slipped. And I've torn the seat of y bags."

Indeed he had done more than tear it. The seat of s bags had entirely vanished.

"I wish I had some water. This egg tastes simply astly," Bertram said in the pensive tone of one who not feeling perfectly sure what his inside is going to within the next few minutes.

"What does it taste like?" his sister inquired with disguised curiosity.

This was too much for Bertram, who retired behind the trunk of the immemorial elm.

"You were a cuckoo to ask me that," he said reproachfully when he reappeared white and shaken. "I wouldn't have catted if you hadn't asked me what it tasted like."

Once again the suggestion of a possible comparison for that appalling taste was too much for him. Once again he retired behind the elm, after which he lay on his back and announced that he thought he should be all right again in a few minutes if Viola did not talk to him.

Bertram had not really recovered from the shock of that hard-set egg when Harold appeared on the scene to say that the sidesman had given him back his medal when the service was over.

"Who cares about your beastly medal?" Viola scoffed. "Bertram's just fallen down from the very top of this tree with a most frightful crash."

"Is he dead?" Harold asked as he turned his glasses on the prostrate form of his cousin.

"Of course I'm not dead," said Bertram, sitting up. "But I've torn my bags behind, and I must have your coat to walk home in."

Harold hugged the vestment close.

"Mother said I was to keep it carefully buttoned up all the way in this wind," he muttered obstinately.

"Well, she didn't know Bertram was going to tear his bags, did she?" Viola demanded.

Bertram rose from the ground and turned round to prove to Harold how much he was in need of his overcoat. But whether the shock of nearly losing his medal had temporarily deranged Harold, or whether he was merely being revengeful, he was still unwilling to cover Bertram's nakedness. He stood there with averted glasses evidently determined not to recognize the necessity in which his cousin was placed.

"Mother said I was to keep it carefully buttoned up all the way," he repeated doggedly.

Now Bertram had scratched his face, swallowed an

ppreciable portion of a hard-set pigeon's egg, bruised his bow, grazed both knees, and shaken himself pretty oroughly. As he stood there with the east wind curling rough his legs, he felt in no mood to coddle Harold. t. Martin had cut a large piece off his cloak for a beggar. r Walter Raleigh had flung his cloak down in a puddle r Queen Elizabeth to walk over. The very birds of ie air (one of whose nests he had just robbed) had not esitated to cover the Babes in the Wood with leaves. et here was Harold, buttoned up in a heavy overcoat, hole-seated and unbruised, refusing to contribute anyiing to the comfort of his walk home. Here was Harold aying the priest and Levite to one who had fallen among ieves and lay wounded by the wayside. Here was arold, who, by putting his medal in the offertory-bag, y rushing out of the pew after the sidesman, and by ausing everybody in church to turn round and stare at m and his associates had made a public ass of his cousin, ad driven him out of church, and was directly responsible r his fall from the elm, for his bruises, and for the ominable taste still in his mouth, here was Harold lmly proposing to break every rule of decency and nerosity by remaining buttoned up like a Nansen while e victim of his recent behaviour in church was to walk l the way home in a suit of Etons, least adequate of rbs to conceal the seatlessness of one's bags.

The male Siamese cat when about to fly at a rival utters high wail of warning which to those who do not know m might sound almost plaintive. Bertram's preliminary y before he sprang at Harold and knocked him into a tch beside the right of way possessed the same quality. "Unbutton his coat, V, while I hold him . . . ouch! ke that knife away from him."

"He hasn't got a knife," Viola yelled above Harold's lls. "You rolled over on some nettles."

Buttons were lost by all three who fought that Easter orning in the ditch beside the right of way to Braxted apel-of-ease; but Harold lost most. Indeed, by the

time Bertram and Viola had torn the overcoat from him, there was not a button left on it. How Harold escaped with whole glasses was one of those miracles with which fortune favours spectacled schoolboys.

"I'm going to run all the way home," Harold panted. "And I'm going to tell mother what you've done to my overcoat."

"Sneak!" Bertram shouted after him.

"Tell-tale tit, your tongue shall be slit," Viola shrieked. Then she turned to her brother.

"Can't you catch him up and push him into the pond by the second stile?" she urged.

"No, I can't run in this beastly coat," he replied. "It's most stinkingly tight."

So Harold was first home with his account of the outrage which, even to the partial ears of Hugh, did sound an almost inexcusable act of violence.

"Though I expect when we get the other kids' version we shall hear another story," he said.

"I'm sure we shall," Hilda agreed bitterly.

Even George had been enough stirred from his perennial lethargy to say he felt inclined to give Bertram a jolly good thrashing.

"And if I had my way, I'd whip Viola soundly too," Hilda declared, "for I expect the truth is she egged her brother on."

And then perverse fortune turned on Harold and abased him.

"I hope Bertram and Viola aren't tormenting poor little Frida," said Edith. In a moment, kind creature, she was ashamed of such a suggestion and quickly added: "But I'm sure they aren't."

"What was Frida doing while your other two cousins were tearing your coat off you, Harold?" his mother asked. "Why didn't she come back with you? I should have thought she would have been too much disgusted with the others' behaviour to stay with them."

Harold's nose twitched under his embarrassed spectacles

"She wasn't there."

"Wasn't there?" Edith echoed.

"She wouldn't cross the field with the cows in it, and forgot about her when Bertram and Viola knocked me nto the ditch."

"Do you mean to say my poor little Frida is all by erself with those dreadful cows?" Edith gasped. Laurence! Laurence! Do you hear? She'll be gored o death."

"Now do not agitate yourself unduly, my dear," the ather said. "I will investigate this matter. I gather rom Harold that she has not actually ventured into the eld with the cows. Is that right, my boy?"

"She wouldn't come with me."

"And so you left her to her fate, did you?" Hugh put n. "You're a fine plucky chap, you are. Serve you olly well right if you did lose your coat."

"Well, I forgot about her," Harold muttered.

"The poor child was half-distraught," said his mother. I'm surprised he could even find his own way home."

"Rot!" Hugh scoffed. "I believe he just bolted and eft her to be trampled to death by the cows."

"Oh, Laurence, Laurence dear!" the wretched mother f Frida moaned. "Do make haste."

But Laurence the matador, his cloak streaming in the vind, was already pressing forward to the rescue of his orsaken daughter, who at this moment had just been ound by Bertram and Viola weeping beside the gate n the other side of the cow-ridden field. Perhaps her ontinuous sobbing had irritated the animals. At any ate, when her two cousins had managed to persuade her nto venturing back with them, the cows did all suddenly egin to prance about and throw their legs in the air.

"Look here," said Bertram to the girls, "you'd better oth scoot as hard as you can to the gate, and I'll try to eep them off."

"Well, I'll try and keep them off with you, Bertram," is sister volunteered.

"No, no," he said, feeling more and more heroic "You get Frida over the gate. I'm going to frighten them with Harold's coat."

So Laurence arrived in time to see Frida and Viola reach safety and his black-sheep nephew running about the field while he waved an overcoat and uttered wild screams to divert the attention of the cows from the two small members of their own sex.

"Bravo, Bertram," Laurence cried. "Hold on, my boy. I'm coming *ventre à terre* to your help."

By now the cows had gathered into a bunch, and motionless with perplexity, were watching Bertram's antics in mid-field. The arrival of the matador waving his big black cloak was too much for them, and they stampeded to the furthest corner.

"Shoo! You brutes! Shoo! Shoo!" Laurence intoned after them. Then seeing his nephew's seatless bags he exclaimed: "Good gracious, my boy, have you been tossed?"

And though Bertram explained about the fall from the elm-tree, Laurence preferred to think that a cow's horn had ripped the seat from his bags, so that by the time they reached the house he had made a hero of Bertram and of course another hero of himself in doing so.

"Everybody's against my poor little Harold," Hilda complained to Edith.

But even kind-hearted Edith could not forget that Harold had abandoned Frida to a herd of infuriated cows and she would not hear another word against Bertram's behaviour over the overcoat nor lament the loss of a single button.

That afternoon Mr. Wenlow, a shy and colourless neighbour, called at Ambles. He was the owner of a disobedient and bushy dog, whom he had brought with him The result was a nerve-shattering fight in the hall with Beyle, which ended in James's dragging him off into the library, where he and his bulldog growled away together at the world for the rest of the afternoon. Poor Mr

Wenlow, balanced like a pale jelly on the edge of a chair n the drawing-room, looked like melting away on to the arpet in a pool of embarrassment. So Hilda, to create diversion, told Viola to hand round her Easter egg. Hugh, who was near Laurence, dug him in the ribs significantly at this. Then he strolled casually out of he room to intercept his niece on her return with the gg.

"Viola, don't forget to give your uncle Laurence the ne wrapped in gold paper. You remember what I told ou after lunch?"

She nodded and kept her thumb on the fatal chocolate vith the aplomb of Lucrezia Borgia herself while she demurely handed the great egg round to the ladies irst. Then she brought the gold-wrapped chocolate o a place of prominence and went over to her uncle Laurence.

"Viola," Hilda called out sharply, "visitors first. Mr. Wenlow hasn't been offered one yet."

The child hesitated and looked at Hugh, who winked nd nodded in the direction of the visitor. Deflecting her ourse from Laurence, she approached the colourless isitor. The disobedient and bushy dog, which had been oaxed into lying under his master's chair, bounded out t the prospect of food and immediately scattered the ontents of the egg with his paw. Mr. Wenlow, in his nxiety to apologize for the bushy dog's behaviour, picked p the first chocolate he saw, which happened to be the atal cream, and insisted on keeping it to eat himself.

Viola again looked at Hugh, who motioned her to say othing, and turned to his brother-in-law.

"Laurence, watch Wenlow's face," he murmured. "I ancy there's something odd about that chocolate he's aken. I don't remember seeing one wrapped in gold aper, and I saw Hilda with some gold paper in her hand his afternoon. Of course, Wenlow may not show any igns of having been . . . My god, Laurence, look at im!"

The horrified Laurence saw their visitor's face contor itself into a more hideous expression than he would hav believed it was possible for the human countenance t assume, for he had not seen Bertram's face when he wa combing some of that hard-set pigeon's egg out of his mouth Now Laurence was not a bad man, and he was still techni cally in Holy Orders. He was not going to stand by an see a fellow creature chew himself to death without offerin any advice.

"Spit it out," he called across the room, and then with what he regarded for the rest of his life as one of th finest examples of imaginative presence of mind eve displayed, he added, "Spit it out, Mr. Wenlow, if you'v broken a tooth."

But there was no need of his advice. Mr. Wenlo would have dared much for the sake of good manners but not even he could have kept that nauseous chocolat in his mouth another moment. Indeed, it was alread on its way into his lap when Laurence uttered the warning And even as it fell the disobedient dog greedily lapped i up. A moment later the dog, its bushy tail between it legs, was tearing round and round the drawing-room in a effort to escape from the taste of bitter aloes, of which i had swallowed enough to keep a whole school of boys fro biting their nails for a year.

"I think these religious festivals are a public nuisance," said George, when Mr. Wenlow had been ushered from th house to the accompaniment of ferocious growls from Beyl behind the library door. "I suppose there was coconu in that chocolate. Some people can't stand coconut."

"What *was* in that chocolate, uncle Hugh?" Viol whispered.

Her uncle closed one eye solemnly and told her not t forget it was a deadly secret.

"Is it a conspiracy, uncle Hugh?"

"That's it."

"It's rather fizzing being a conspirator," she said, wit a contented coo.

As for Laurence, he knelt down that night and said his prayers with a reverence that his wife found a most encouraging sign of his faith's return. She thought he was giving thanks for Frida's preservation from the cows.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RED BARN

BERTRAM and Viola had not forgotten Mrs. Pringle's invitation to accompany her to the matinée of *The Red Barn* at the Wrottesford Hall on Easter Monday, and it was a relief to hear on Sunday night from their uncle Hugh that he proposed to drive in to lunch at the Blue Dragon next morning. They were so excited that for once they went to bed without attempting to impugn the accuracy of the Ambles clocks. That night, in a world gaily painted by the two primary colours, they seemed to float upstairs to bed. The Blue Dragon and *The Red Barn!* Rich indeed was the nocturnal air in which they turned over to sleep and thus hasten the advent of an enchanted to-morrow.

The midday meal in the coffee-room of the Blue Dragon was a fitting preliminary to the excitement of the afternoon performance, for it was crowded that day with rubicund farmers and plump farmers' wives in satin and lace who had driven in to Wrottesford in order to wile away the Bank Holiday. Most interesting of all, not merely to the children, but to the rest of the diners, was the large oblong table in the middle of the coffee-room at which were seated the chief members of Mr. Cavendish Howard's Company, which was appearing positively for six performances only at great expense in the Parish Hall, Wrottesford, in six of the world's most famous dramas. The children were, of course, familiar with actors and actresses. They had often been present with

their mother at gatherings for the exercise of theatrical charity; but Mr. Cavendish Howard and his company were different from ordinary London actors and actresses, and certainly far more impressive. They admired particularly Mr. Vivian Courtenay, the leading juvenile, whose hair was nearly as black and curly and luculent as the astrakhan collar of his coat; and they watched Miss Coralie St. Clair (Mrs. Cavendish Howard) drinking bottled stout with as much intentness as they would presently be watching her performance of the hapless Maria Marten.

Bertram, indeed, was so much fascinated by the appearance of the company that he began to contemplate going on to the stage himself, a profession which hitherto he had rejected in case it should make his sister too cocky about her choice of it. When he compared his own state of life faced by the horrors of unending education with that of Mr. Vivian Courtenay lounging with both elbows on that central table and flicking with a knife small fragments of cheese off his plate into his mouth, he felt that the favours of fortune were inequitably distributed. When thus comparing his lot with that of Mr. Vivian Courtenay Bertram uttered a profound sigh.

"What's the matter?" his uncle asked. "Eaten too much?"

"No, I was thinking," the boy answered, his blue eyes liquid with thwarted ambition. "I was thinking it was awfully rotten to be young, uncle Hugh. Did you hate being young?"

"Well, I'm not very old yet."

The nephew and the niece humoured him with a smile.

"You're twenty-seven, aren't you?" Viola gently reminded him.

"Nearly twenty-eight," Bertram added. "Good gummy! I wish I was nearly twenty-eight!"

The melancholy induced in the boy by the contemplation of his own youthfulness vanished in the excitement of hearing the rich voice of Mr. Cavendish Howard proclaim that the hour was at hand; and as the manager passed

out of the coffee-room, followed by the members of his company, he was heard to observe to his wife :

" It's spotting slightly, pet. That ought to drive 'em in."

Miss Coralie St. Clair, a great blonde Britannia of a woman with a mauve complexion, looked back at the raindrops on the window-pane and told her husband in accents of pulsating emotion not to forget her umbrella.

Mrs. Pringle had sent up word by the waiter to bid the children and Mr. Touchwood to her private sitting-room as soon as they had finished their lunch. Here she welcomed them warmly and insisted on their drinking half a glass of port wine while she finished what she described as her final titivation before setting out to the matinée.

" No port for me, thanks," said Hugh.

" Ah, no, not for you. A glass of brandy for you, Mr. Touchwood. Well, and perhaps I'll have one with you. Port does lie a bit heavy. But half a glass won't hurt these kiddies. It's coming on a nasty drizzle and they'll want something to keep out the cold in that blessed hall, and which is the draughtiest, coldest place outside of the North Pole anybody could find. I don't want to send them home with their deaths, or their pa would never forgive me."

" He'd get over it," said Hugh.

" He said yesterday we were more damned nuisance than income-tax collectors," Viola informed her.

" Well, tax collectors are the limit, I'm bound to say," Mrs. Pringle agreed. " I said to the last one who came ferreting round here, I said ' Anybody would think,' I said, ' that it was your own money you was worrying about instead of the Government's. My returns are strickly accarate,' I said, ' and which is more than your boss-eyed adding up is.' That's Robson, the local collector, that is, and a man I never could stand ever since his first wife had hardly settled down comfortable in her grave before he married a most ignorant and objectionable hussy who

I wouldn't have married myself, not if I was on a desert island with nothing but a lot of lions and tigers to look at morning, noon, and night. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'll pop into the bedroom and put my hat on."

Presently she emerged, magnificent in black and purple satin, with a hat the Three Musketeers might have envied.

"We're going to drive down to the Hall in the victorier, so I thought I'd give Wrottesford something to look at before the curtain goes up."

Hugh excused himself from going to the play, saying that he had a good deal of business to do in the town and that he could meet Bertram and Viola at the Blue Dragon when the performance was over.

Mrs. Pringle winked at the children after their uncle's departure.

"He has a very gay eye, that uncle of yours," she observed. "Oh, well, I like a man with a gay eye myself. Mr. Pringle had a very gay eye. A very gay eye he had. If ever he saw a fine-made woman pass by on the other side of the road his eyes used to shine like door-knobs. Many's the time I've said to him, 'Arthur!' because his name was Arthur and I could not call a man weighing nearly twenty stone Artie—'Arthur,' I've said, 'you'll go off with a bang one of these days like a Roman candle.' Ah, little I thought when I used to joke with him like that, for I was never a jealous woman, that he actually would go off so sudden one day. Well, almost with a bang, you might say."

The memory of her late husband was heavy on Mrs. Pringle's heart for a moment. She dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief.

"Well, come on, loveys, let's go and have a good cry over poor Maria Marten. But the fact is I always get a bit sobbified on a Bank Holiday, because my poor dear old Arthur so loved a Bank Holiday. Well, he enjoyed standing treat to people."

The progress of Bertram and Viola on either side of

Mrs. Pringle in the Blue Dragon victoria caused a sensation in Wrottesford; two elderly rustics remained staring after the vehicle for over half an hour before they retired to a bar, there to spend the rest of the afternoon in silent meditation upon the strange exciting life of the local metropolis.

When they reached the hall they found a crowd outside, unmindful of the drizzle and listening open-mouthed to Mr. Cavendish Howard, who was standing on a rostrum under a red canopy to proclaim the fare within.

"Walk up, walk up, ladies and gentlemen, walk up! At half-past two precisely will be performed the world-famous drama entitled *The Red Barn*, which as you all know depicts with startling and photographic accuracy the old dictum that the way of the transgressor is hard. Walk up, ladies and gentlemen, and see with your own eyes how William Corder shot his sweetheart Maria Marten through the head and buried her body in the Red Barn with a pickaxe. Walk up, and see the horrors of the deed unfold themselves one by one before your very eyes. Walk up, and see the last moments of the heartless murderer in the condemned cell at Bury St. Edmunds. Seats are now obtainable price threepence, sixpence, one shilling, and two rows in the front of the house as sat in by many of the most prominent personages of the day at one shilling and sixpence. Threepence, sixpence, one shilling, and eighteenpence! No money returned. You cannot afford to miss the murder of Maria Marten in the Red Barn. It will be a lesson to some of you young men and young women I see standing there in front of me for the rest of your lives. Maria Marten by Miss Coralie St Clair, late of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. William Corder by Mr. Vivian Courtenay, a rising young actor for whom the critics prophesy a career of unexampled brilliance. To-night at half-past seven precisely the world-renowned and haunting drama of *Jane Shore*. Do not miss the great scene in which the unhappy mistress of an English monarch does penance with bare feet wearing

a white robe and carrying a lighted candle in her hand through the blinding snow. To-morrow afternoon at half-past two precisely *The Ticket of Leave Man*, the greatest drama of the world of crime ever staged. Cavendish Howard as Hawkshaw the detective, in which part he has appeared over one thousand times and roused furores of delirious applause. To-morrow evening at half-past seven precisely the great Irish drama *The Colleen Bawn*, with songs by Miss Coralie St. Clair, late of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. On Wednesday afternoon at half-past two precisely *Green Bushes*. If you cannot come yourselves, tell all your friends who can not to miss this appealing drama of Wild West life. On Wednesday evening positively the last performance in Wrottesford of Cavendish Howard's world-famous company, when by special request will be given the noblest of all modern plays—the heart-searching, tear-compelling drama of *East Lynne*, in which Miss Coralie St. Clair, late of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, will take her benefit and surpass even her own inspired self. Walk up, ladies and gentlemen! The performance will commence very shortly. Come inside and forget your troubles in seeing how William Corder was unable to escape his just doom for the foul murder of his sweetheart Maria Marten in the Red Barn. This drama according to a well-known clergyman has done more to bring home to young people the evil of their ways than any sermon he ever preached. Seats threepence, sixpence, one shilling, and eighteenpence! Children under twelve half-price, and babies-in-arms free!"

With this peroration Mr. Cavendish Howard retired within to assume the costume of Maria Marten's father.

"Well, I'm bound to say it's wonderful the way he remembers all that," Mrs. Pringle observed, as she led the way to the front row, which with the row behind was distinguished from the rest of the hall by a long strip of red felt laid across the seats of the chairs.

The curtain rose on a room in Goodman Marten's cottage.

Miss Coralie St. Clair, who looked enormous in a white muslin dress, after a brief opening scene retired, sobbing with gratitude for William Corder's offer to make an honest woman of her. No sooner had she gone off to tell her mother the good news than Mr. Vivian Courtenay, in riding-breeches and box-cloth leggings, showed his true character. He advanced down stage, and, fixing Mrs. Pringle with eyes, the lashes of which were loaded down with liquid black, he confided to her that his pent-up soul had assumed the garb of smiling love to give his fiend-like thoughts the prospect of success.

"There's a rascal," Mrs. Pringle murmured. "Tut-tut!"

"The deed were bloody, sure, but I will do't, and rid me of this hated plague."

With these words Mr. Courtenay tapped his leg viciously with a riding-crop, and after lighting a cigarette strode up stage.

"Fancy that!" Mrs. Pringle observed. "He'd made up his mind to do the poor girl in as soon as the curtain went up. Didn't wait not five minutes. Just reckless cruelty, that's what I call it. Enjoying yourselves, duckies?"

Bertram and Viola nodded entranced, and Mrs. Pringle passed them a bag of very large and very hot striped brown and white peppermint bull's-eyes to enable their emotions to cope with the next scene, which was described in the programme as the outskirts of Polstead village. The same tremulous backcloth and cut-wood wings of dingy green would during the next few days represent the boundless prairies of the West, the shores of Killarney, and the garden of Edward the Fourth's palace. William Corder walked up and down, tapping his leggings with the crop, and peering furtively round the cut-wood wings. His soliloquy sent cold shivers down Mrs. Pringle's back, especially when he snarled right at her, for she was by so much the most prominent figure in the front row that she could not avoid his confidences.

"The Red Barn is the spot I've fixed on to complete

my purpose. Everything is ready to inhume the body. That disposed of, I defy detection. Now for the cottage."

There Corder made the fatal appointment, and in the next scene he was pacing up and down the Red Barn itself, which bore a most remarkable likeness to Goodman Marten's cottage. Indeed, except for the absence of a table and three Windsor chairs, it might have been the same place.

"Tut-tut," Mrs. Pringle clicked when Corder had confided to her the way he was going to murder Maria and bury her body. "Tut-tut, what a pity one can't slip round at the back and tell the poor girl not to meet him to-night."

But there was nothing to be done, and Maria Marten, still in white muslin and looking more enormous than ever, came timorously on.

"Oh, my goodness, if the rascal isn't going to shoot her with a pistol. I thought he hit her on the head with a pickaxe, or else I wouldn't have come," said Mrs. Pringle in great agitation. "Oh dear, oh dear, I can't abear a bang in the theatre."

She shut her eyes, and worked up Bertram and Viola to such a state of nervous excitement that, when at last Corder did fire and Maria's body crashed like an avalanche on to the stage, both children swallowed the bull's-eyes they were sucking and nearly ruined by their coughing Mr. Vivian Courtenay's soliloquy over the body of his victim.

The next act was as thrilling as the first, because Maria Marten's mother, asleep by a fender, a poker, and a pair of tongs (down stage left), dreamt that she saw her daughter's body being buried by Corder; and, as during the interval Miss Coralie St. Clair had had time to change into a blood-stained dress and smear her countenance with gore, her appearance even behind the gauze of Dame Marten's dream gave Mrs. Pringle what she described as an attack of blue horrors.

"Well, I shan't forget this afternoon in a hurry," she

told the children. "I knew we should get a good murder, but this is something ghashly."

The final scene in the condemned cell was reached. Corder, still in riding-breeches and leggings, delivered a long soliloquy to Mrs. Pringle on his crimes, and then fell asleep. He had no sooner done so than the ghost of Maria Marten appeared behind the gauze and addressed him thus:

"Canst thou, murderer, hope that sleep, soft balmy sleep, can e'er be thine?"

"Certainly not," Mrs. Pringle replied from the front of the house. "It's not to be expected."

"Look on they victim who adored thee, pale, cold and lifeless," the ghost continued. "See, see from whence her life's blood gushed. William, William, they poor Maria pities, pities and forgives her murderer."

"Well, not even a ghost could say fairer than that," Mrs. Pringle observed. "And look at him writhing on the floor like an eel. He must have seen her all the blessed time, though he pretended to be asleep. Tut-tut! It shows what a mistake it is to go and murder anybody. Upon my word, the manager was right when he said it was a lesson to all of us. Good land in heaven, she's there again. He'll have the D.T.'s in two two's. She'll send him potty."

"Hence! Avant! Thou art not of this earth. Vision, hence, I say, begone. I know thee not, Ha! What! Vanished? Whither? But no, she's there again. Spectre shade! Maria! Gone! Gone!"

"I think she's hopped it this time for good," Mrs. Pringle murmured. "What's he doing now? Trying to write her a letter. The man's barmy. Well, she talked about barmy sleep, and she was about right. Oh, he's clean off his rocker. Tut-tut!"

Just then William Corder flung on the floor of his cell the paper he had been writing, and groaned:

"There is my confession. I am, I am her murderer."

"Well, of course you are," Mrs. Pringle said. "It's a waste of time telling us that—oh, my lord, what's this

ellow coming in now with a face the colour of a Stilton heese ? "

"It's the Hangman," said Viola in a gloating voice. ' Can't you see the rope on his arm ? "

" Well," said Mrs. Pringle, when the final curtain fell, ' I reckon that's taught me a lot, that play has, and now et's get back home and sit down to a good tea and forget ll about it."

On the way out of the hall Bertram nudged his ister.

" Look, V, there's uncle Laurence."

And so it was. He might have been himself a figure n one of those old dramas as he strode tragically out, is great black cloak gathered round him. Who now emembers *The Stranger ?* Laurence might have been he. t is a melancholy thought that not merely does the poor layer strut and fret his hour upon the stage and then is eard no more, but that the very parts in which he strutted nd fretted have most of them mouldered away to dusty eath on the top shelves of libraries. Such might have een Laurence's meditation as he strode out into Wrottes- ord High Street that afternoon, his brow deeply furrowed. Vhat he was actually pondering was that abrupt appearance f the hangman at the end of the play. That face, the olour of a Stilton cheese, had left a most unpleasant mpression upon him, and for the whole of his walk back o Ambles it preyed upon his fancy. He wished now that e had invited Hilda to accompany him to the matinée. he would surely pause when next she held the tin of eed-killer in her hand, pause and call to mind the grue- ome expression of that hangman's face before she dusted ie contents over the common meal. Suppose Wenlow ad been too shy to spit that chocolate out yesterday ? uppose he had gulped it down out of politeness ? There ust have been an inquiry, and there might have been an rrest. Suppose he himself had told the police what he uspected ? Might they not have decided that he was ying to fasten his own crime upon another ? What

was his best course? Should he tackle Hilda and tel her point-blank that he knew what she was up to? Yes but that might seal his own doom. She would, as Hugh had pointed out, try to get rid of him first. It was quee the way she had diverted Viola from offering him th Easter egg. That looked as if she wanted to try the effec on somebody outside the family circle and so get a littl practice. She would rely on the absurdity of her wantin to poison a colourless man like Wenlow to avert suspicion Still, she must be in a most reckless mood, because afte all she could not have felt sure that Wenlow would choos that particular chocolate. Any of the others might s easily have taken it.

In ordinary circumstances how lightly he would hav laughed at the old-fashioned drama he had seen thi afternoon! But now, just because he was himself ha involved in a mystery, every line came back to him wit a dreadful actuality. Anyway, that hangman with th green face . . . Laurence shuddered. He was walkin up the wide diagonal of the Hanger, and the silence o the woodland was beginning to get on his nerves. An then when he emerged from the shadow of the grea beeches on to the common he saw Hilda herself standin in the middle of the road like one of the witches in *Macbe* and waving to him.

Laurence had not felt such a sudden constriction o the throat since he preached his first sermon as a theologic student. His first thought was that Hilda had take advantage of Hugh's absence and his own to poison a the rest of the family, and that she was now wanderin demented about the country-side. It would be a cowardl thing to do, of course, but really should he not be justified i turning round and pretending that he had not seen he until Hugh came along with Viola and Bertram in th dog-cart? It would be easier to face the obliteration o more than half the family in the company of those wh were spared. He wished now that instead of worshippin the cruel idol of physical exercise he had waited behind t

drive back with the others from Wrottesford. And now Hilda was apparently running toward him, running very ast, too, for a woman of her age. Yes, it looked most ndubitably as if she had gone mad.

Laurence took out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead n an agony of apprehension as Hilda drew nearer.

"Oh, Laurence, I'm so glad to see you," she panted. 'There's been an accident, and I said I'd hurry along nd cut you off."

"Cut me off, Hilda?" he stammered.

"Yes, we thought you might go for the doctor. It's ames."

"Have you given him an emetic? Warm mustard and vater is the thing."

"But an emetic wouldn't do him any good."

"It might. It may not be too late. How much did e take?"

"He didn't take anything. It's his ear."

"In his ear?" Laurence echoed, recalling that grim cene with henbane in the Elsinore orchard. She must ave done it when he had fallen asleep in the library over book. Poor old James, he *would* insist on having that oom to himself. . . .

"Yes, the dart was stuck somehow, and poor little Harold must have puffed away at it without noticing that is blow-pipe was pointed at James, and the horrible thing it James's ear."

"Blow-pipe? Dart?"

"Yes, don't you remember the South American blow-ipe his dear father sent him back? The wound is othing, a mere prick; but James has got it into his ead that the dart may be poisoned. I told him Daniel articularly wrote that the darts were not poisoned, and ou know what a careful man he was and how accurate bout the simplest little facts. Had I supposed the darts ere poisoned, *should* I have allowed Harold to play ith them?"

"I hope not indeed, Hilda," said her brother-in-law

gravely, for it seemed a good opportunity to seize for pressing home a moral.

"Well, of course I shouldn't," she said fretfully. "I'm not a perfect idiot."

"And you want me to fetch the doctor, is that it?"

"Yes, Beatrice insists. She is bathing the lobe of his ear with peroxide and iodine, and Edith has kindly hurried over to Four Lanes Farm to get them to send in the trap for the Galton doctor, but I thought I might meet Hugh with the dog-cart and get him to bring Dr. Brewer too. I argued with Beatrice that if the dart were poisoned James would be dead long before any doctor could arrive, but she has worked herself up into such an hysterical state that it was all James could do to prevent her trying to suck the poison out of his ear. George, of course, would do nothing. All he's thinking about is whether Hugh will remember to bring him back an evening paper."

"Well," said Laurence, "far be it from me to emulate the indifference of George, but I have just walked nearly five miles, and I confess that the prospect of another five-mile tramp back is not a tempting one. Apparently Edith has already charged herself with a mission of healing and mercy. Surely one doctor will be enough? And the trap will be half-way to Galton by now. Moreover, as you have justly pointed out, Hilda, if the dart has been dipped in the deadly venom of the South American Indians James by this time is past mortal aid. I prefer, however, to be optimistic, and not to believe that poor Daniel would have sent back a lot of poisoned darts for his only son to blow about the house at random. Come, Hilda, let us see what has happened meanwhile?"

"But I promised Beatrice I would do my best to fetch Dr. Brewer."

"And have you not done your best, Hilda? If you have nothing worse than your behaviour this afternoon with which to reproach your conscience, you may face the Great Unknown without a tremor, nay, with a certain confidence."

While Laurence was speaking he fixed his sister-in-law with what he hoped was an eye that would impress her with its ability to pierce the innermost recesses of her mind. She faced his glance squarely, and he began to wonder if by chance he had done her an injustice in suspecting her of manipulating the contents of Walpole's Wonderful Weed-killer.

"Well, really it does seem unnecessary for you to toil all the way back to Wrottesford. I'd hoped that Hugh would have been back by now; but of course the last thing Hugh would suppose is that anybody else might be wanting the dog-cart this afternoon. I wish poor little Harold's dart had hit him or George!"

"Do not let us wish it had hit anybody, Hilda. That is surely the most charitable standpoint to adopt. And now come, let us put our best foot forward. I am anxious to see how it fares with poor James, and incidentally I shall not refuse a cup of tea."

"I'll have to make one for you myself. Jane and Ethel have gone with Pobjoy and William to a fair in Galton, and cook is lying down with a headache."

"Oh, don't you trouble about me," said Laurence quickly. "I am an old hand at catering for myself from my curate days."

Hilda by her evident anxiety over the poisoned dart had done much to rehabilitate herself, but he did not think it was right to put temptation directly in her way by letting her make him a cup of tea.

When they reached the house they found James looking perfectly normal, except for the lobe of his right ear, which had turned to a rich walnut-brown under the application of iodine.

"*Coraggio*, James," his brother-in-law intoned. 'Rumour says a worthy leech is on his way."

Beatrice clapped her hands.

"There now, I never thought of that! Why, we might have sent Harold down to find some leeches in the pond."

"I spoke poetically, Beatrice. I did not mean to

suggest the actual application of aquatic blood-suckers to our good James's ear."

"Let my damned ear alone, Beatrice," her husband growled. "I've looked up in a book about this poison, and if there had been any on that confounded dart I should be dead by now."

Beatrice began to sob.

"Don't talk like that, Jimmie; it's temptin' providence."

"Bunkum," her husband retorted.

Edith came in at this moment to say the Four Lanes trap was not available."

"Well, as I'm obviously not poisoned," said James, "so much the better. That'll save the doctor a journey and myself the price of it."

"Have you tried dusting James's ear with boracic?" Edith asked.

"I'm not going to have anything more done to my ear," the wounded man declared.

"Come, Edith," said her husband, "if you are anxious to minister to somebody, will you kindly minister to me with a nice cup of tea?"

"Oh, haven't you had tea?" she exclaimed in dismay. "My dear Laurence, you'll be starving. Oh, I'll go at once and make you some. What a dreadful thing! Oh dear, I am so distressed."

And, as Beatrice observed somewhat acidly to Hilda later on, anybody might have supposed that it was a far more serious matter for Laurence to have missed his afternoon cup of tea than for Harold to have hit his uncle on the ear with a dart from a South American blow-pipe.

Meanwhile, Bertram and Viola, oblivious of the rival drama which had been played at Ambles that afternoon, were recalling every detail of *The Red Barn* over the superb tea they were enjoying in Mrs. Pringle's parlour at the Blue Dragon.

"We could act it next Sunday," Viola suggested.

"Well, mother is coming down next Sunday," her brother reminded her.

"Your ma coming, is she? That'll be nice," Mrs. Pringle put in. "But what manners I've got, to be sure, speaking with my mouth full of hot buttered toast. Eat up, loveys. You've got a long drive in front of you, and your uncle's down in the snuggery quite content with himself and the world in general."

"Well, we could act it as a treat for her," Viola argued.

Bertram frowned. The truth was an unsolved problem was vexing him, and the solution of it was not apparent. He was anxious to play the part of William Corder, and he was equally anxious to be the hangman, and how he could manage to be both was not evident.

"I think," he announced, after the inspiration of two boiled eggs and a plate of sardines, "I think that Harold can play William Corder in the last act, and I think that we'll have the scene of the execution, which they didn't have this afternoon."

Viola looked sharply at her brother. He was proposing to break one of their most sacred rules by this casting of *The Red Barn*.

"Well, if you're going to be Corder and the hangman, I'm going to be Maria's mother and Maria's ghost. Then Frida can be Maria when she's alive."

"Yes, but if you're Maria's ghost you can't be her mother, because her mother saw her ghost."

"Well, Frida can be her ghost then; but I want to be her ghost in the condemned cell and say, 'See, see, from whither my life's blood hath gushèd; see thy poor victim, William; see thy murdered Maria, who thou seducted without a pang."

"Life-like, I declare," Mrs. Pringle leaned back to ejaculate in admiration of Viola's ghostly performance.

Bertram would have liked to oppose his sister's pretensions; but, since he desired her help over playing the hangman, he surrendered to these liberties with the rigour of the game, though by the puckering of his rosy face he was evidently suffering some artistic qualms.

"Got a pain, duckey?" his hostess asked.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Pringle. Could I have a little more damson jam, please?"

She unloaded half the pot on his plate immediately, and just then Hugh came in to ask what about going home.

"Good heavens alive, Mr. Touchwood, let the poor mites have a morsel of food first. They're famishing! You can't go and look at blood and murder all of an afternoon without feeling a bit hungry at the end of it. Sit down for a minute, do, and have a drop of something to keep you from fidgeting."

So, with a brandy and soda of a fine amber shade beside him, Hugh sat down in the arm-chair by the fire.

"Mrs. Pringle," he began, "I've got a plan in my head, and I want your advice and help."

"Advice is cheap, and you can always rely on me for help," she replied. Then she turned aside for a moment to spur on her young guests. "You're eating nothing, duckies."

The children looked apologetic, for the accusation was true. They were no longer eating anything. They could not.

"I want you, Mrs. Pringle," Hugh went on, "to drive out to Ambles one day soon and tell me what you think of my ideas for turning the place into an hotel."

"Into an hotel?" she repeated. "But it's miles from anywhere."

"I didn't mean a house of call," he explained. "My notion was to fit it out as a place where people could come and spend a quiet time in the depths of the country, yet not so far from London as to be cut off from it in case of need."

He elaborated his scheme for her benefit, and it was not long before Mrs. Pringle was as enthusiastic over the prospects of success as Hugh himself.

"A home from home, that's what you're really after," she proclaimed. "A nice cosy little nest where anybody could come and bury themselves, anybody like a honeymoon couple, for instance, who don't want to be racketing

about all the time. You'd have separate tables, of course ? "

" Well, that's the kind of detail about which I want your advice."

" Quite so ; I see."

" And I want to know what staff will be required and how much one can charge for this and how much for that."

" Quite so. Exackly. I know just what you want. Well, when shall I come out ? "

" As soon as you can."

" Friday ? No, Friday's an unlucky day. What about Thursday ? "

" Thursday will be splendid. But there's one thing I ought to tell you, and that is my plan for turning Ambles into an hotel is a secret. So you mustn't let on what you've come over for."

" I see. I'm to be the woman of mystery. Why, it's as good as a play. Well, I'll take the victorier and drive out on Thursday afternoon. It's early closing in Wrottesford ; but that won't matter, because the first early closing after a Bank Holiday is always very quiet. It's not till the Saturday that people seem to want to stretch themselves a bit more."

" It's awfully good of you, Mrs. Pringle, and now we must really stretch ourselves. Come on, you kids, you're about gorged into insensibility."

But the muteness of the children was not due to the amount they had eaten, impressive though that was ; it was due to contemplating with what was almost ecstasy the proposed visit of Mrs. Pringle next Thursday afternoon.

" Will she really come, uncle Hugh ? " Viola asked when the dog-cart was bowling along on the way back to Ambles.

" I hope so," he answered with a light flick of the mare's haunches. " But don't you say a word about my having invited the old girl over."

" Is it a secret ? " Viola asked.

" A deadly secret."

"Hurrah! I like secrets. Don't you, Bertram?"

"I don't mind them frightfully," her brother admitted, careful at the same time not to expose himself to the least suspicion of gushing.

"Will you show Mrs. Pringle your stamps?" she asked.

"I say, shut up asking questions all the time. I'm trying to think about our play. I wish we could have done it when Mrs. Pringle comes to Ambles."

"Well, couldn't we?" Viola suggested.

"No, no," Hugh put in. "I'll have a lot of business to talk over with her. And mind, not a word about this plan to turn the place into an hotel. You'll spoil everything if you let that out. I'm trusting you, mind."

"You will let me be a barmaid, won't you?" his niece asked. "And I think father could be the boots, because he simply loves cleaning boots. He always cleans his own."

Hugh turned round on the box in surprise.

"I didn't know he had enough energy."

"Well, he takes a long time about it. He likes best cleaning the boots he hasn't been out in. And what can Bertram be in the hotel?"

"Shut up asking what I can be, young Viola," said her brother indignantly. "You've no right to ask that. I never heard such cheek."

"Ask yourself, then," she urged, "because I want to know what you're going to be."

"Fish and find out," her brother invited aggressively.

The truth was he did not want to get any position assigned to him until he had investigated more thoroughly the various opportunities of an hotel staff. And then suddenly there came back to him from an hotel on the South Coast, at which he had stayed with his mother two years ago, the ideal job.

"I think I'd like to be the night-porter," he told his uncle.

"Look here, I'm serious about this hotel business," said Hugh severely. "It's not one of your confounded plays."

"So am I serious," said Bertram. "That's why I'd

ike to be the night-porter. I don't want to go to bed. I imply hate going to bed. If Higginbotham comes to stay vith me in the summer hols, uncle Hugh, he can't go o bed at a quarter to nine. He never goes to bed before en at home, and I shall feel a most frightful ass if I have o go to bed at a quarter to nine."

"Time enough to talk about that when the mighty Higginbotham does arrive," said Hugh. "But you can ely on me not to do anything to offend him, because I equire his services."

"In the hotel?"

"No, no, for something else."

With suchlike gossip about the future the drive seemed hort enough, and they reached Ambles just as Hilda was aying in an aggrieved voice that she supposed they would rrive when supper was over.

Harold had been subdued for an hour or two after his ccident with the blow-pipe; but he had recovered himself y the time his cousins got back, and when in the school-oom they began to brag about the excitement of *The Red Barn* and the variety and richness of their tea t the Blue Dragon, Harold began to brag about his ccident with the blow-pipe.

"And the hangman had the most awful face you can magine," Viola was telling him. "You'd have been so rightened, Harold, that you'd have run out of the all."

"No, I wouldn't," said Harold sulkily.

"Yes, you would."

"I wouldn't. I'd have shot him with my blow-pipe."

"You stinking little ass, how could you?" Bertram emanded truculently.

"Well, I could," Harold maintained, "because I shot ncle James with it after tea."

"Liar!" shouted Bertram and Viola simultaneously.

"I did, didn't I, Frida?" the marksman appealed.

Frida looked up from the book she was reading by the reside and nodded earnestly. The other two gazed at

one another in perplexity. Whopping bung though it sounded on the lips of Harold, Frida was not given to the utterance of whopping bungs.

"Where did you shoot him?" Bertram challenged.

"In the dining-room."

"I mean what part of him, you silly fathead?"

"On the ear."

"What did he say?" Viola probed.

"He said, 'Damnation, what's that?'"

Frida, who was reading a book called *Twelve Boy and Girl Saints*, put up her hands to shut out the bad word. Uncle James's language wounded her ears as sharply as Harold's dart had wounded his.

"But did it stick right in?" Bertram asked incredulously.

"It would have stuck right in if his ear hadn't been so soft," Harold maintained. "But his ear bent, so the dart wouldn't stick. But there were some drops of blood, one quite big one, and when I said it was my South American blow-pipe that my dear father sent me all the way from the Amazon, uncle James thought he was poisoned. And his ear has turned quite brown, because auntie Beatrice painted it with iodine."

The story was too circumstantial to have been invented by Harold. Bertram and Viola felt that some of the edge had been taken off the murder in the Red Barn, even some of the flavour of those sardines and that damson jam. However, the story should not be accepted without fuller investigation.

"Go down into the dining-room, V, and see if his ear is brown," Bertram commanded. "And if it isn't brown, we'll paint both Harold's ears with raw sienna and his nose with burnt umber from Frida's paint-box."

"Oh, no, please, not my paint-box," Frida begged. "I'm keeping my paints to illuminate two texts for mother's birthday."

"Well, you don't want browns for texts," Bertram argued. "We're not going to touch your gamboge or

vermilion or crimson lake or cobalt blue or emerald green."

"But I'd rather you didn't touch my paint-box, Bertram," said Frida primly.

Luckily any outrage on the paint-box was averted by Viola's coming back presently to announce that without doubt uncle James's ear really *was* brown.

"As brown as what?"

"Well, as brown as wood."

Bertram now went down to the dining-room on the excuse of having left something under a chair; and he was so much fascinated by the colour of his uncle's ear that on the way out he stood staring at it in a rapture, until he was sharply told by his aunt Hilda not to hang about in the dining-room while his uncles and aunts were at supper.

It was obvious to Harold when his cousin returned to the schoolroom that he had scored a triumph over the matinée party. Pride surged within him, pride and a desire to patronize.

"I'll let you blow with my blow-pipe once to-morrow, Bertram," he offered.

"What, hasn't it been taken away from you?" Viola asked.

"Mother took it away from me when uncle James thought he had been poisoned; but when he wasn't she gave it back to me if I would promise not to shoot anybody again."

Bertram's scowl had been deepening since Harold made that offer to let him blow his pipe. He knew that a contemptuous refusal would sound like pique and gratify his cousin more than anything else. Something must be done, and that quickly, to put Harold in his place. Harold had shot uncle James in the ear with a blow-pipe, had he? Harold was going to wax bumptious over that feat, was he?

"I don't want your beastly blow-pipe," he said. "But I want your vacuum-pistol."

A hunted look came into Harold's eyes. He had a

feeling that Bertram was going to shoot up the schoolroom presently.

"Why do you want it?" he parried.

"It doesn't matter to you why I want it. V, go and bag his air-gun while I hold him."

"No, no," cried Harold in agony, for that air-gun in his bedroom was almost his dearest possession, and the vacuum-pistol, which would not kill small birds, did not hold such a warm place in his heart. "I'll lend you my vacuum-pistol."

Bertram examined the weapon, rammed home the spring with the rubber-tipped arrow, and aimed at a gollywog that was sitting on the top of the schoolroom cupboard. He missed the gollywog, but brought down one of Frida's favourite dolls, which fell with a crash on to the floor, and cracked its china cheek.

"You cruel, cruel boy," she cried, as if the goggle-eyed creature were a sentient being. "Miriam darling, has it hurt you very much?"

Bertram flung down the pistol in disgust.

"This beastly thing won't shoot straight. How could I hit uncle James's other ear with a rotten thing like that?"

"Were you going to shoot at his other ear, Bertram?" his sister asked fondly.

"Yes, I was going to ambush them as they came out from supper."

"Well, you've got your bow and arrows," she murmured.

But even to put Harold finally in his place, Bertram was not prepared to shoot an arrow at such short range. He reminded her, with a scornful look at Harold, how he had hit uncle Laurence miles away from the shrubbery already this week.

"But there wasn't any blood," Harold gloated. "And there was blood on uncle James's ear when I hit him with my South American blow-pipe. There's a spot on the carpet, which I'm going to look at with my microscope to-morrow when it's daylight."

"Come on, V, don't stand there like a stuck pig," said er brother fretfully. "Let's go and do something."

But the discouragement of Harold's triumph with the low-pipe was heavy on him. He could think of nothing etter to do than to try to squirt his sister with one of the ot-water bottles in the pantry, and as this ended in his etting much more of himself than of her, it was not a uccessful riposte to Harold.

"I think I'll go to bed," he announced at last in the oice of one for whom the future held nothing.

"But, Bertram," she gasped in consternation, "it's only alf-past eight!"

"Well, I don't care; there's nothing to do. I wish ve'd asked uncle Hugh to let us stay in Wrottesford to see *ane Shore* at the hall to-night."

"Mrs. Pringle is coming over on Thursday," she reminded im.

"Good lummy!" he groaned wearily. "That's ages nd ages away. What are we going to do till then?"

"Well, we can do something."

"I thought we were going to have a ripping time these ols," Bertram sighed. "But there's nothing to do, so 'm going to bed."

"Would you like me to come and talk to you while you ndress?"

"No, thanks," replied an ungracious brother. "I'd rather be by myself. I'm feeling frightfully sad to-night. I wish it was ten years from now."

"But Mrs. Pringle's coming on Thursday, and if it was ten years from now her visit would be gone."

"She probably won't be able to come," said Bertram. "Nothing ever happens as one would like it to."

"Well, I'm sure she will come."

But he shook his head gloomily. Harold's success with the blow-pipe had shrouded the world too darkly for any light to be perceptible to the unhappy Bertram. Moreover, he had eaten too much, even for his digestive ability, at Mrs. Pringle's tea; and now to his mental depression

was added an ever increasing awareness of an unnatur distention.

"My belly's as tight as a football," he told his sister.

"You're not going to have dropsy, are you, Bertram ? she asked anxiously.

"I don't know. But I'm going to bed," he murmure in tones of profound despair.

CHAPTER IX

MRS. PRINGLE AT AMBLES

THE visit of the Cavendish Howard Company to Wrottesford was always considered responsible for urning Laurence's mind in the direction of magic. It as absurd, of course, to blame the apparition of that assive Maria Marten behind a gauze for his new interest n ghosts, though certainly his acute phase of spiritualism id date from this Eastertide. As a matter of fact, he ad several times before dabbled in parlour sorcery, and he real cause of a revived passion was his finding an old *lanchette* among the odds and ends of rubbish brought o light by a spring cleaning. The new craze began by hutting himself up in his study and experimenting with utomatic writing. Whatever Laurence took seriously ad to be taken seriously by the world. So from the oment he consulted *planchette* it became infallible. From is unerring guide he learnt that Hilda was not trying to oison anybody, that Ambles was the ideal spot for spiri- ualistic experiment, and finally that the prospect of his wn success on the stage was doubtful. As he humorously aid, the little board soon warned him to beware of the ig boards.

"You don't really believe in this rot?" Hugh xclaimed.

"I do indeed, my dear fellow, and I have little doubt ut that I shall soon convert you. It is most fortunate hat this revelation of latent powers in myself hitherto nsuspected should have been granted to me when I am

in a position to take the fullest advantage of it. I asked my little friend *planchette* last night if the surrounding of Ambles were propitious to communication with th world of spirits, and in a flash the busy little oracle of th hidden world around us glided over the paper to write what do you think, Hugh ? "

Hugh managed to remember that his brother-in-law had once been a vicar in time to check the rude word upo the tip of his tongue.

" Whatever you wanted it to write, I expect," h substituted.

" That is scarce worthy of you, my dear fellow," Laurenc said reproachfully. " Idle scoffings at these mysteries wi lead you nowhere. Come, come, you must arm yoursel with something better than stale gibes if you are going t discredit *planchette*."

With this he offered Hugh the piece of paper on whic the oracle had replied to his question.

" You will see there a most unmistakable affirmative, he pointed out.

Hugh looked at the paper on which the pencil had mad the kind of mark that a skater inscribes on the ice befo he crashes in the middle of cutting a figure of eight.

" You call that an unmistakable affirmative ? "

" I do," said Laurence positively. " That is a perfectl plain ' Yes.' "

" It's an equally plain ' No,' " said Hugh.

" There are none so blind as those who won't see," th convert observed sadly.

" Well, you must have been pretty blind when you wro that hieroglyphic and thought it was ' yes.' Why, I cou sneeze a better ' yes ' than that."

" Fortunately for your destructive criticism, my de fellow, my reading of that hieroglyphic was mo remarkably confirmed by a loud rap."

" By a loud what ? "

" A loud rap."

" On your head ? "

"I see you are determined to be flippant, Hugh," said his brother-in-law with a tolerant smile. "But excelsior! I shall hope soon to make you as keen a mystagogue as myself."

"Do you mean Mr. Gog or Mr. Magog?"

Laurence shook a well-groomed finger at Hugh.

"Laugh away. I do not mind your ribaldry, for I know full well that you will not always laugh. I am myself but a humble student as yet. However, now that I have an assurance of the fitness of this house for my communications with the unseen world, I hope to do great things, great things, Hugo lad. But you must give me time. I cannot tell you what a relief it was when *planchette* positively rebutted the dreadful suspicions of our excellent Hilda I had been so uncharitably entertaining. It was a lesson to me, Hugh. Yes, I have done kind Hilda a grave injustice, and I am very thankful I never breathed a word to Edith about the weed-killer. Her only sister, you know. It would have been a stunning blow to Edith."

This was the moment when Hugh decided not to bother any more about frightening Laurence out of Ambles with poison, but rather to take advantage of his latest craze to eliminate him from the family party. With this plan in view he abruptly simulated a readiness to be convinced.

"Well, Lorenzo, of course there may be something, after all, in this spiritualistic business. We'll have some séances later on when you've had a little practice with the paraphernalia and are a bit more familiar with the manners and customs of spooks."

"I shall be delighted, Hugh. But might I make one little suggestion? Avoid such derogatory expressions as 'spooks.' I have reason to suppose that the spirits object as strongly to being called spooks as our coloured brethren object to being called niggers."

"All right, old man, I'll remember that," Hugh promised, as he left Laurence to his magical studies and went off to ponder over the best way of applying them to his own purpose.

Whatever part the visit of the Cavendish Howard Com
pany played in turning Laurence's attention to spiritualism
there is no doubt it influenced profoundly the life of anothe
member of the Ambles community. James of all peopl
took it into his head to drive in to see the matinée o
The Ticket of Leave Man, and after lashing its absurdit
all through dinner with the tongue of a sophisticate
literary critic went off to the library and began idly t
write a skit of it.

"Thrillin', Jimmie!" his wife exclaimed when he rea
her the first scene that night.

"But don't you think it's devilishy funny?" he asked
a little taken aback by her reception of his *jeu d'esprit*.

"Funny?" she repeated indignantly. "I think it
splendid. Who said it was funny?"

"Well, I thought it was rather funny," James said.

"Jimmie, why don't you have a little confidence i
yourself? Who knows? You might write a play whic
would make us rich for life. But if you're goin' to thin
everythin' you do is funny, we'll never get anywhere."

James regarded the few pages of manuscript with a rueful
expression on his sallow face.

"Do you mean seriously to tell me that you don't thin
what I've just read to you funny?"

"No, I don't. Really, I don't, Jimmie. So do go o
with it."

And James did go on with it, chuckling to himself a
first, but gradually losing his self-consciousness an
beginning to manipulate his crudely painted puppe
sincerely.

"Jimmie's writin' a simply gorgeous play," his wi
told everybody, and in a final effort to be creative herse
she bought twelve penny packets of annuals and sowed the
in a bed Huggins had prepared for French beans.

Hugh began to realize what an increasingly difficult jo
it was going to be to get rid of James and Beatrice. Beyl
too, was burying bones all over the place with the industr
of a pirate. He was evidently expecting to spend the re

of his life here. However, Hugh went ahead with his own plans, and having managed to get hold of most of the fifty pounds John had provided for the foundation of the Ambles Museum—an eventuality which, it may be mentioned, John himself had foreseen when he wrote his letter for the first of April—he had arranged with Farmer Pocock for the delivery of six baby Berkshire pigs, from whose progeny when they grew up he and George were to make that steady income in the future he had so richly gilded. The pigs arrived from Highrood Farm early on the morning of the day Mrs. Pringle was expected, and at an hour when both the prospective pig-breeders were still in bed. George was the first to hear of their arrival, because Viola and Bertram in their excitement brought one of the pigs up to his room and put it on his bed.

"Drive that infernal dog out of here," George shouted on being woken by the convulsive plunges of the terrified animal over his somnolent form.

"It isn't Beyle," the children yelled. "It's one of your pigs."

"Such a little darling," Viola added.

George leapt up in bed with a muffled roar, and the wretched piglet, already nearly distraught by the journey upstairs, charged with a wild squeal between Bertram and Viola to hide itself in their father's wardrobe, the door of which was open.

"You confounded little blackguards," he shouted, "what do you mean by waking me up at this hour with a filthy animal like that?"

"Well, we thought you'd like to see one of them," Viola said. "We were going to take it up to uncle Hugh when you'd patted it. But you frightened the poor little thing so when you jumped up from under the bedclothes like that."

"Aunt Hilda wanted to send them away," Bertram went on, "and when I said they all belonged to you and uncle Hugh, she said you must get up at once and settle where they were to go."

"Haven't you learnt by this time that my health won't allow me to settle anything before lunch?" the angry father demanded. "Take that animal out of here. Listen to it trampling on my clothes. Take it out at once, I tell you."

"It's only trying to hide itself, poor little thing," said Viola compassionately. "You frightened it. Piggie! Piggie! Come along, piggie," she called endearingly.

"Don't talk to the brute as if it were a trained pet," said George, jumping out of bed and routing in the wardrobe with a rolled-up copy of *The Racing Specialist.*

The piglet, terrified by the resemblance George bore to the butcher, with bristle-raising threats of whose approach its mother had been wont to obtain good behaviour in the stye, scampered out of the wardrobe between his legs and, after charging the slop-pail with the vigour of a Corinthian forward, fled squealing under the bed.

"Open the door," George shouted, "I'm going to drive the brute out into the passage."

"You'll hurt it with that umbrella, father," Viola protested.

"I'll hurt you with it in a minute, you abominable child," he retorted.

Just then Hugh, who had been angrily bidden by Hilda to get up at once and stop any more pigs being brought into the house, arrived on the scene in a dressing-gown to ask in a cheerful voice where the little joker was.

"Under my bed," said George, rising up on the other side of it with a wrathful face as red as a shepherd's warning.

"Father's poking at it with his umbrella," said Viola "Do tell him not to, uncle Hugh."

"Look out, George. That's a valuable young thoroughbred pig," said the owner.

"Well, what the devil's it doing in my room?" demanded George. "Why weren't you up to look after these pigs of yours? I made it perfectly clear that if I came in with you over these animals you were to look after them.

was fast asleep when I was woken up by a noise like a steam-engine to find a pig rooting about in my blankets. I thought for a moment I'd lost my reason."

"We only brought it in to show father before we brought it up to show you," Viola explained.

At this moment Beyle's bark was heard along the passage.

"Shut the door," Hugh cried. "That cursed dog of James's will seize the pig if we're not careful. Where are the others?"

"Farmer Pocock's man is waiting with them in the cart," the children told him.

By this time Beyle, in spite of his congested nose, had evidently scented the pig, for he was springing up against the door of George's bedroom with angry growls. Hugh opened it and shouted at him to go and lie down; but he had to close it hurriedly and was only just in time to prevent the bulldog's biting a mouthful out of his dressing-gown. George's bedroom window looked out on the garden at the back, and Bertram in outraged accents was crying out that, under the leadership of Harold, Huggins, Pobjoy, and William were hurrying across the lawn.

"The little cad's going to show them where the other pigs are," he said. "I'm sure he is. Harold!" he shouted down, "you've no right to show anybody where the pigs are. They're our pigs, not yours, you little swizzler!"

"Huggins! Pobjoy!" Viola screamed from the window. "Don't put the pigs in the styes till we come down. Uncle Hugh's up here. Don't let Harold show you where they are."

George himself now went to the window.

"Huggins," he called, "one of these pigs has got up into my room. Come and get it down before it does any more damage."

The excitement at George's window finally produced an effect on the party below, and William was detailed to go and find out what was the matter.

"Were you calling, sir?" he inquired from the lawn below.

"Tell Huggins to come up here and take away the pig that's in my room."

"In your room, sir?" William repeated in a bewildered voice.

"Can't you understand English, you little pumpkin—I mean bumpkin?"

William put his hands to his mouth and shouted to the gardener:

"Hi! Mr. Huggins! Mr. Huggins! There be a pig in Mr. Jarge's room."

The more shouting that went on, the louder became Beyle's barks, the more ferocious his clawing at the door of the bedroom.

"I shall be ill for a week after this," George groaned, flinging himself down on the bed with such a sudden weight of despair that the pig squealed in affright and rushed from underneath the bed back into the wardrobe.

"Splendid!" Hugh cried. "Shut it in now."

And nothing that George could urge on behalf of his clothes would induce him to open the door until a relief party arrived. The relief party, however, had no sooner showed their noses round the head of the stairs than Beyle tore along the passage and drove them helter-skelter backward down into the front hall again, after which he tore back along the passage as hard as he could and drove back Hugh, who had tried to emerge from George's bedroom. For the next ten minutes with an energy that was really remarkable the bulldog managed to keep anybody from coming upstairs and anybody from coming out of the room.

"He'll ruin the carpet in the passage," Hilda groaned. "Where can James be? This dear quiet old-fashioned house is becoming a lunatic asylum."

It was a pity that John Touchwood, fast asleep in New York at this moment, could not hear Hilda's wail of misery. It would have gratified him inordinately.

At last James, who under the exhilarating influence of play-writing, had actually taken to conventional exercise after breakfast, came back from his stroll and Beyle was persuaded to retire with him into the library.

"You were a couple of duffers," Hugh told Bertram and Viola later, when all the pigs were safely housed. "You've turned your father against pigs for the rest of his life. Now don't go and make a mess of Mrs. Pringle's visit this afternoon."

They were standing by the pig-styes while Hugh was giving this lecture, and his words were accompanied by a ground-bass of strange sounds emanating from the inner part of one of them.

"Hark," said Hugh, "that poor little brute you carted upstairs is in pain."

Bertram and Viola looked at one another and grinned.

"Nothing to laugh at," said their uncle sharply. The pigs were new possessions and, like most people with new possessions, he was taking them very seriously for the present.

"Well, it is something to laugh at," said Viola, "because it isn't one of the baby pigs at all who's making that noise."

"What is it then?"

"It's Harold."

"Harold?"

"Yes," said Bertram, "when he was so sidy about showing Huggins where Farmer Pocock's cart was, we pushed him inside one of the styes and bolted him in."

"Not with one of the wretched pigs?" Hugh asked in some alarm for his treasures.

"No, no, you silly," Viola laughed. "In one of the empty styes."

The dull thumps of Harold's fists upon the inside of the bolted door and his muffled cries to be let out were now distinguishable, like the words of a soprano when one has the libretto.

"We heaped all the litter against the inside door," Bertram explained. "Shall we let him out now?"

"Yes, yes," his uncle said. "I don't want to prejudice

your aunt Hilda too much against these wretched pigs. Otherwise, she'll take it out of the poor little brutes by not letting them have the scraps from the kitchen."

So Harold was released; and his spectacles, as he stood there blinking in the sunlight, gave him the look of some nocturnal animal which had been dug out of its burrow.

"You'd no right to shut me in there," he declared.

"Yes, we had," said Bertram.

"Why had you?"

"Because you're a hog."

"I'm not a hog."

"Yes, you are," Viola put in. "You're a cocky little hog."

"I'm not, I'm not," cried Harold passionately.

"You're a cocky little hog," Bertram repeated with emphasis.

"It's you who's a cocky little hog," Harold retorted in a phrenzy of desperation.

Viola gasped.

"I say, Bertram, did you hear what he called you?"

Her brother had reeled against the wall of the pig-styes as if his cousin's *tu quoque* had been a physical blow.

"I'm going to lam him for that," he announced. "I'm going to give him the most frightful lamming he ever had. I'm going to smack his head five times, and then I'm going to simply lick him till he blubs."

Harold, on hearing this medieval sentence, stooped down and picked up a stone.

"I'll throw this at you with all my might and main," he warned his enemy.

Viola, perceiving danger for her brother, sprang at Harold, who flung the stone just as she scragged him round the neck.

"Hi!" Hugh yelled out. "You caught me right on the knee, you little cannibal."

"It was Viola's fault," Harold half-sobbed. "She made me throw crooked when she put her arm round my neck."

"Yes, and now I'll have to go and wash my hands,"

Viola commented, "because all the dirt off your neck has come off on my hands."

"There isn't any dirt on my neck."

"Yes, there is; there's bucketfuls."

"There isn't," Harold moaned.

"There's enough dirt to grow mustard and cress on it," Viola asserted.

"So there is on yours," he averred.

"That's enough, that's enough," Hugh intervened.

"But I haven't lammed him yet," Bertram objected.

"That's enough, I say," Hugh repeated. "The only person who gets seriously damaged in these operations is myself. Go on, cut off, Harold, and read some astronomy or something."

"I don't read astronomy on Thursdays, uncle Hugh. On Thursdays I read *Our Earth and What it is Made Of*."

"Oh, you do, do you? Well, I'd rather you didn't make an object-lesson of me in future," said Hugh, rubbing his knee.

When Harold had escaped into the tranquillity he never knew in the company of his cousins, Hugh turned to Bertram and Viola.

"Now mind, when Mrs. Pringle arrives this afternoon, don't go and carry her off upstairs to show everybody. And not even a whisper about the reason of her visit."

"I think she'll come, don't you, uncle Hugh, because it's such a ripping day?" Viola asked, gazing up with gratitude at the unclouded sun until her dark eyes were moist.

"I vote we climb up on the roof after dinner," said Bertram, "and look out for her through my telescope. So don't go guzzling a second helping of pudding, because then perhaps they'll let us get up from the table and we can be out in the garden by twenty to two."

"Yes, and we could play Bluebeard while we're waiting for her. You can be sister Anne and I can be Fatima."

"Thanks very much," said her brother haughtily, "but you don't think I'm going to act a girl, do you?"

"Well, you could act a Turkish girl, because they wear trousers."

"I'm not going to act a girl," Bertram hotly declared, his cheeks flushing at the suggested indignity. "Besides, Bluebeard is a kid's story. I'm not going to act anything until we act the murder in the Red Barn, and if you talk any more rot I won't tell you what I've thought of for the scaffold."

"Oh, what have you?"

But Bertram did not answer. The truth was he could not, for as yet he had thought of nothing suitable. And Viola, divining this, knew better than to press him.

So after dinner, by making themselves agreeable to Pobjoy, they induced him to put the ladder against a secluded wall of the house; and at some risk to themselves, but even more to the mossy tiles, they managed to straddle the roof so as to get a view both of the road across the common and also of the road on the other side of Ambles, which, at the price of an extra mile, avoided the steep climb up the Hanger.

It was about half-past three when the victoria of the Blue Dragon was sighted on the other side from the common. By this time Bertram's arm ached so much with the effect of sweeping the view with his telescope that, in descending the roof, he nearly fell headlong, and was only saved by Viola's grabbing his hair and holding on to it long enough for him to recover his grip. They reached the ground again just as Hilda was rushing into the house from the front lawn, where she had been taking advantage of a fine day to sit quietly in a deck-chair.

"Beatrice! Edith!" they heard her call. "Who is this extraordinary creature coming up the drive in a carriage?"

"Don't excite yourself, Hilda," Hugh said, emerging from the drawing-room at that moment. "She's coming to see me."

"Who is she?"

"She's Mrs. Pringle, the proprietress of the Blue Dragon in Wrottesford."

"Well, really, Hugh," his sister exclaimed, "I do think you might have warned us at lunch whom you were expecting. She might have got out right on top of me if I hadn't looked up from my book and seen her in the nick of time."

"Well, if she had," Hugh laughed in that coarse way which always exasperated Hilda, "you'd have been flatter than you are already, because she weighs about fifteen stone."

"She's ringing the front-door bell," Hilda exclaimed, too much amazed at such coolness on the part of a woman who kept what was really just a public-house to pay any attention to her brother's rude remark.

"What did you expect her to do?" he asked. "Dive in through the door head-first?"

By this time Bertram and Viola had opened the door and were greeting Mrs. Pringle with delighted expansiveness.

"Hullo, Mrs. Pringle, we were looking out for you on the roof."

"You were?"

"And Bertram nearly fell off when he saw you coming."

"He did?"

"Well, my arm was stiff, because I'd been holding up my telescope since twenty minutes to two."

"Ah, Mrs. Pringle, how good of you to come over," Hugh came forward to say. And then, without giving Hilda a chance to escape, he actually introduced her to the visitor.

"My sister, Mrs. Curtis."

Mrs. Pringle offered an immense and cordial hand, into which Hilda put her own rather as if she were trying the temperature of some very hot water.

"Perhaps Mrs. Pringle will excuse me if I leave her?" she said, looking down her nose. "I have some business to see to in the house."

"That's right, my dear," the visitor applauded. "I you've something you want to see to in the kitchen, you pop along and see to it. I'm a busy woman myself, and I know what it means to be interrupted at the wrong moment."

Hilda by this time was positively squinting down her nose as she retreated along the passage leading to her domestic realm. Mrs. Pringle nodded her head in the manner of one who has formed an opinion it will be difficult to change.

"A bit stiff, your sister, or sister-in-lore, is it?"

"My eldest sister," said Hugh.

"Yes, I thought there was a likeness. You're both the thin, saller kind. Not like this apple-cheeked rascal here," she commented, beaming at Bertram, who beamed back at her, his face as plentifully wrinkled with honest pleasure as a ball of wool.

"Yes," Mrs. Pringle went on, "you wouldn't catch her bending in a hurry, and which is perhaps as well, or she might break in half. Good land alive, what ever was that?"

The ejaculation had been prompted by the sudden flash of Harold's glasses round the corner of the staircase and an instant later their withdrawal.

"What was what, Mrs. Pringle?" Viola asked.

"Why, I thought I saw an old man's head peeping at me round the banisters. I'll take my dickie I saw a pair of goggles anyway."

Viola shrieked with mirth.

"That's not an old man, Mrs. Pringle. That's Harold."

"Harold?"

"Yes, he's our cousin. That was his mother you saw just now. She's called aunt Hilda."

"Well, why doesn't this Harold come on out of it? Who does he think I am? William the Conqueror, 1066? Ah, you didn't know I knew my history-book like that, did you?" She chuckled, prodding Bertram in the ribs with the handle of her green umbrella.

"Come out, Harold," Viola yelled. "This is Mrs. ringle, who gave us that cherry-brandy."

Harold emerged from beneath the staircase.

"Solomon in all his glory, eh?" Mrs. Pringle observed. What a wise-looking child! My goodness, anybody ould think he was stuffed with book-learning. I wouldn't are to race him through twice-two-is-four, and that's a ct."

"He's more stuffed with food," observed Bertram.

"No, I'm not," said Harold, glowering through his ectacles uncomfortably.

"Yes, he is. He sucks up to the new cook," Bertram ent on.

"I don't."

"Her name's Mrs. Smith, and Bertram and I don't ke her," Viola contributed.

"I don't suck up to her," Harold repeated, for the esence of Mrs. Pringle emboldened him to suppose that e might defy his cousins without involving himself in a and-to-hand struggle. "I'm learning to cook, and Mrs. nith is helping me."

"Learning to cook?" Mrs. Pringle repeated. "Well, nd why not, after all. Live and learn they say, don't ey?"

"I'm learning to cook," Harold continued breathlessly, ecause when I grow up I'm going to be an asplorer."

"Asplorer! Ha-ha!" Viola jeered. "A fine *ex*plorer ou'll be when you can't even say *ex*plorer, you little dunce."

"I can say it. And I'm not a dunce. I'm going in r a scholarship when I'm thirteen."

"Well, why did you say 'asplorer'?"

"I didn't."

"Yes, you did."

"Now, now, now," Mrs. Pringle interposed pacifically. It's too lovely a day for 'dids' and 'didn'ts.' But ncy anyone picking on being an explorer at his age," e turned to the aspirant. "What are you going to plore, Stanley?"

"I'm going to explore the South Pole," Harold pro claimed loftily.

This was the first time his cousins had heard of thi ambition, and it struck them as so comic that they nearl collapsed upon the floor in irresistible laughter.

"Come along, you two buffoons," said Hugh. "Mr Pringle and I have got some business to do. We can' spend the afternoon laughing out here. This is th drawing-room, Mrs. Pringle," he continued, as he ushere her into that large and pleasant room with its wistaria decked view of the lawn sweeping down to the walle garden. "I thought we'd make this the central loung or do you think we ought to make it the dining-room ?"

Suddenly Hugh was aware of Harold's glasses fixe upon him as intently and motionlessly as the lens of microscope upon a display of minute pond-life.

"Look here," he said, "I didn't invite you to com tramping round at my heels. Go away and play wit your cousins. Take him away, Bertram."

"I arrest you in the King's name," said Bertran clapping a ready hand on Harold's shoulder. "Tak hold of his other arm, V, you chump, or he'll escape."

"I don't want to be arrested," Harold said, with wild struggle to free himself. "I want to go out in th garden."

"Well, we'll take you out in the garden."

"I don't want to be taken. I want to go."

A minute or two later he was seen running for his li across the lawn with Bertram and Viola in loud pursuit

"I reckon those two demons lead him a terror of a life observed Mrs. Pringle, who was surveying the chase fro the window with much clicking of the tongue. "Que thing, but children with gig-lamps always seem to lea a life. My eldest sister's youngest boy wore glasses, a the poor kid couldn't put his head round the door of room without everybody hollering at him not to be inquisitive. He got so jumpy at last that he used chink like a glass himself when anybody spoke to hi

till, he did well in business, and last time I saw him he vas wearing an eye-glass with a black ribbon wide enough o put round a coffin. In fact I passed the remark to im that he looked like a human hearse, and which rather nnoyed him, because, as I say, he'd done really well for imself in business and was thinking of getting married."

By this time Hugh and she had left the drawing-room nd entered George's sitting-room. George himself was ozing in his big arm-chair and Mrs. Pringle did not notice is presence.

"Well," she said enthusiastically, "there's no doubt vhat this room will be, is there? Oh, no, certainly not. 'his will be the gents' cloak-room without the shadder of doubt."

George's florid countenance rose above the back of the hair in alarm. He had not looked more astonished when e was woken up that morning by a black pig running bout on his bed than he looked now at the presence of his large woman in his sanctuary.

"Mrs. Pringle has kindly offered to give us some help bout our hotel plan, George. This is the father of Bertram and Viola."

"And they do him credit," Mrs. Pringle said warmly I never saw a finer pair."

"Yes, but look here, Hugh, I can't have my room turned nto a cloak-room. You should have explained to our riend that I must have a place where I can keep absolutely uiet."

"I know just how you feel," said Mrs. Pringle sym-athetically. "You want a place where you can regular ury yourself, as the saying is. Well, of course, a gents' loak-room wouldn't answer that purpose at all. Not at ll, it wouldn't. In fact quite the contrary. So we'll ave to look elsewhere for our cloak-room."

With this Mrs. Pringle performed what she called the peration of edging herself out of George's sitting-room, difficult one for a woman of her rotundity.

"Why ever didn't you tell me that brother of yours

was sitting in there?" she said in a shocked voice t
Hugh. "It gave me the turn of my life when his fac
bobbed up over the back of the chair like that. I haven
had such a turn since I got into a crowded railway carriag
once and was just going to shift what I thought was
bundle of rugs up on to the rack, when it woke up an
asked me what in blazes I thought I was doing. Wel
really, I wonder your brother was so nice about it as h
was, for I'm bound to say I should have been very annoye
if I'd been woken up out of forty winks to hear a strang
female with a green umbrella proposing to turn my roo
into a gents' cloak-room."

"Now, there'll be another brother in here," Hug
warned her as they reached the door of the library, whe
James was closeted with Beyle. "Be careful not to sa
a word about the proposed hotel, because this broth
knows nothing about it yet."

Mrs. Pringle prepared to enter the library on tipto
to show her sense of the secret.

"Sorry to disturb you, James, old man," said Hug
as he opened the door to discover James at work on
bunch of novels he had to review. "I just wanted t
show Mrs. Pringle this room." Then he turned to h
mysteriously:

"Lounge?"

"Or smoking-room," she whispered hoarsely.

"Not dining-room?"

"Not for my taste."

James stared at the invaders.

"Keep the shape and size of the room in your mind,
said Hugh.

"I will," she whispered.

"And then you'll see the point of the suggestion I'
going to make."

Mrs. Pringle absorbed the shape and size of the libra
while James continued to stare in perplexity.

"Got it?" Hugh asked.

"It's in my noddle," she told him.

When they were outside in the hall again he revealed hat his notion was to divide the library into two and have smoking-room for women as well as men.

"It struck me as a new idea."

"But, bless you, the women don't want to smoke in room by themselves," said Mrs. Pringle.

"You don't think so?"

"No, I don't. If you want a room for women to sit n and smoke by themselves, give 'em your brother George's oom. He won't ever be disturbed then. No, if you ant to make women happy, Mr. Touchwood, you want o give them a place where they can feel they've no usiness to be or where they've no business to be doing hat they are in it. Either let them break the rules y smoking in the drawing-room or let them break the ules by going into the men's smoking-room. Then verybody's happy."

By the time Mrs. Pringle was ready to inspect the itchen Bertram and Viola had returned from chasing Harold, and in the hope that the new cook would be iven a lesson in hospitality, or that at any rate while Irs. Pringle was talking to her they might get their ngers well down into the currant-bowl, they followed heir uncle in.

Mrs. Smith was a tall, gaunt, severe woman who gave he impression that she had taken up cooking as a penance or some light surrender to pleasure she had made in her outh. She had conceived an immediate prejudice against Bertram and Viola, because they were so full of the "old-ashioned audaciousness" she so much deplored. Harold, n the other hand, apparently fascinated her. She would emark to Hilda at the morning consultation about the ay's fare that if all mothers had sons like Harold the orld would be a better place; and once, in a moment f emotional confidence, she told her that if she could ave had a Harold she would even not have grudged Mr. mith being the father of him. About Mr. Smith she as mysterious; but the general opinion was that he

was doing time. Anyway, he had not been a success a
a husband, even going so far in the course of one of thei
arguments as to throw Mrs. Smith, in her own words
skew-whiff over an earthenware bread-pan.

"Now outside of my kitchen this moment," she cried
on noticing the cautious entrance of Bertram and Viola
"You know I will not have you fiddling and fuddlin
about in here."

Mrs. Pringle fancied for the first second or two tha
the cook was addressing her, and the colour of her fa
rosy cheeks deepened.

The children stood their ground defiantly.

"We're not doing any harm," said Bertram.

"We've got a right to stand here if we like," Viol
added.

"Oh, it's you, loveys?" said Mrs. Pringle. "I though
it was a couple of tramps someone was talking to."

Hugh, without paying any attention to Mrs. Smith
asked his adviser's opinion of the kitchen.

"If you've any complaints to make, Mr. Hugh," sai
the cook, interrupting angrily, "I'd be obliged if you'
make all and such through Mrs. Curtis to who and wh
alone I answers for my kitchen."

"Nobody's complaining about your kitchen," sai
Hugh impatiently. "What do you think, Mrs. Pringl
Shall we need any changes in here?"

"I don't see as you need any changes at all, not in th
kitchen itself."

While Mrs. Pringle's eyes had been critically roamin
round the kitchen, Mrs. Smith's eyes had been roamin
round resentfully in their wake, as the result of whic
she had not noticed that Bertram and Viola had slippe
through and had by now gained the larder. The clin
of pudding-mould against pudding-mould sounded
warning note for Mrs. Smith, who swung round just a
Bertram re-entered the kitchen with a plate of quee
looking cakes.

"What are these, Mrs. Smith?"

"You put that dish down at once, you young limb," he commanded.

"Are they cakes for us?"

"No, they're not cakes for you. They're cakes I've been helping Master Harold to bake."

"Did Harold bake these?"

"He did, and very well he's done them for a first attempt."

Bertram found the notion of Harold's baking cakes so exquisitely diverting that he could not resist throwing one of them at Viola, who threw it back at him. Before anybody could stop them, the plate of cakes had crashed on to the stone floor of the kitchen, while the children pelted each other with the contents.

"Mrs. Smith," the voice of Laurence was heard intoning in the doorway, "might I trespass on your time and good-will and ask you to make me a bowl of paste for . . ."

And at that moment one of Harold's cakes caught him in the middle of his high white forehead with a thud.

The blow, coupled with the vision of Mrs. Pringle, who had opened her large green umbrella to ward off the hail of cakes, made Laurence half-ready to believe for a few moments that he had interrupted a Sabbath, for he had spent most of the day in poring over works of witchcraft, and the weight of Harold's cake was enough temporarily to knock the sense out of a wiser man than Laurence.

The children took advantage of a hand being held to his forehead to rush past their half-stunned uncle and escape.

"Ah, Laurence," said Hugh, "you're just the man I wanted. Mrs. Pringle is very anxious to have a look at your study. May I bring her up?"

"Well, I hope you'll excuse me, Mr. . . ." She paused.

"This is Mr. Armitage, my brother-in-law," Hugh said.

"Pleased to meet you. Well, as I was saying, I hope you'll excuse me, Mr. Armitage, for receiving you with an open umbrella, and which they say is very unlucky indoors, but really the noise those cakes made when they

hit the floor quite frightened me. It was like a peal o thunder."

The dazed Laurence allowed himself to be shepherde by Hugh upstairs to his study, while Mrs. Smith went o to search for Hilda and invite her to see what Bertra and Viola had done with her son's cakes.

The furniture in Laurence's study had been pushe back against the walls; the carpet had been taken up and a large pentagram had been chalked on the bar floor.

"What ever's this?" Mrs. Pringle asked, scratchin at it curiously with her umbrella. "A kind o hop-scotch?"

"No, I have been practising the pentagram. I wishe to be sure of myself before I drew it out properly wit vermilion on lambskin prepared without spot or stai under the sun."

"Well, that's a lovely bureau you've got there, M Armitage," said Mrs. Pringle, hoping, as she told Hug afterward, to get the poor fellow's mind fixed on somethin he could recognize. The bureau was the Gothic affa in sham ebony which John Touchwood had once compare to a blind man's dream of Cologne Cathedral. "A lovel bit of work," Mrs. Pringle went on. "Wouldn't tha look a treat in the you-know-what-I-mean, Mr. Touch wood?"

Laurence was too much absorbed in the future of h pentagram to notice the mysterious winks which Hug and Mrs. Pringle were exchanging.

"After that," he intoned, "I must breathe on it fiv times and then dry it with the vapours of five scent incense, aloes . . ."

"Aloes?" said Hugh. "I can let you have plen of them. They're no use to me now."

"Thanks, indeed, Hugo; where was I? Ah, ye sulphur, myrrh, and camphor."

"To keep the moth out, I suppose?" Mrs. Pring asked gravely, for, as she told Hugh afterward, that cal

must have caught the fellow such a ghashly thump that she felt properly sorry for him and thought he deserved a bit of humouring.

"But I must not talk too much about my experiments beforehand, Hugh," said Laurence. "I shall begin in earnest anon. I am writing up to Eleanor to ask her to bring me down some patterns of rare stuffs for my vestments. The whole subject is quite absorbing. And that reminds me, I have a little job for the youngsters. I want a fan of sparrow-hawk feathers, which is strongly recommended by Eliphas Levi."

"Well, a feller with a name like that sounds a bit of a hawker, and no mistake," Mrs. Pringle observed.

The next room they looked in at was the boudoir which Beatrice had woven for herself out of what seemed odds and ends of ribbon and lace.

"Sweetly pretty," Mrs. Pringle declared with warm enthusiasm. "I never saw a more sweetly pretty room not in all my life. Oh, it would be a shame to use this room for anything but a special private room, and for which you would be certain to get a good price."

"Don't worry, Beatrice," said her brother-in-law, "Mrs. Pringle and I are furnishing a castle in Spain."

"That's right," Mrs. Pringle said. "My father was a nut from Barcelona, and so was ma, so there you are, as who-was-it used to sing?"

One by one the rooms of Ambles were visited, and after that Mrs. Pringle was taken round the garden, shown the stables, and, in short, given as complete a survey of the house as if she were an intending purchaser.

"Well, now you've got the hang of it," said Hugh, "I can come over and consult you about the details of my scheme any time."

"That's right. Pop in when you like," she urged him amiably.

"And now come along and have a cup of tea."

But Mrs. Pringle shook her head to this invitation.

"No, I think your relations have had about enough

for one afternoon of me and my prowling around. Besides, I'm happier in my own snuggery. So I'll just hop into the victorier and slip away."

Bertram and Viola arrived in time to hear this remark.

"You're not going, Mrs. Pringle?" they gasped.

"Yes, I am, duckies. I've got my own house to see to."

"But we wanted to show you thousands of things," Bertram protested.

"Well, look here, I'll tell you what. You jump in beside me, and I'll drive you into Wrottesford and John Richard will drive you back this evening in the trap. From what I could make out you've knocked one of your uncles barmy with that cake you threw at him. Cake i You'd have hurt him less with a bit of coke. His mind's wandering already, and you won't be popular with aunts or uncles for a time."

Bertram and Viola looked at Hugh with a question.

"Cut off," he told them.

"That's right," Mrs. Pringle glowed. "We'll have a rare old talk on the way back. And I've got a box of crystallized fruits under the seat."

The indignation against Hugh was so unanimous that the escape of Bertram and Viola was not noticed.

Beatrice and Hilda pecked at him like a couple of cockatoos, and even Edith's plumage was ruffled, for she attributed to his importation of Mrs. Pringle the graze and bruise on her husband's forehead. James tried to make it clear that he considered the library his own room and took exception to the way Hugh had brought that woman in, while George, in spite of being in the secret, had not yet recovered from the shock of hearing Mrs. Pringle's proposal to turn his cherished room into a gentleman's cloak-room. As for Harold, he sat burning holes in his uncle with his glasses, for he had been expecting to hand round those cakes at tea, win much admiration for them, and obtain leave to make some toffee for himself this evening. He had been forbidden to do that fo

several weeks, because last time he had forgotten to butter the plates and in his anxiety to get at the toffee he had broken the plates with the coal-hammer.

Hugh, however, was quite unawed. He was still trying to make up his mind whether the drawing-room was going to be the hotel lounge, or whether it should be the dining-room.

CHAPTER X

GHOSTS

PEACE had been declared by Bertram and Viola in their war with Harold, because they felt that otherwise he would never be persuaded to play the part of William Corder in the condemned cell, let alone to submit to an ignominious death upon the scaffold. Harold was not slow to perceive the advantage he held, and before he would consent to appear he bargained with them like an operatic star or a delegate at the Versailles Conference or a heavy-weight boxer.

"Well, if I let you hang me," he laid down as his first condition, "you must promise never to run after me again."

"All right," said Bertram impatiently, for he felt it was absurd of Harold to start making terms like this when he was willing to promise him anything.

But Harold wished to have all his conditions cut and dried before he exposed himself to that ignominious end.

"And you must never laugh at me when visitors come," he continued.

"It isn't because we laugh at you that visitors think you funny," Viola said. "It's because you look so funny yourself that people laugh at you."

Harold's face was set in sullen refusal to believe this, and Bertram, on whom the responsibilities of a producer were beginning to weigh a little heavily, told his sister to shut up.

"We won't ever laugh at you," he promised.

"And you're not to snatch my book away when I'm reading," Harold resumed.

"Who wants your rotten books?" Viola could not refrain from demanding.

"Will you shut up, V," her brother said peevishly. He did not intend to have these delicate negotiations wrecked by feminine acrimony. "All right, Harold, we won't ever snatch your books away."

"And you must promise not to take my air-gun, or my vacuum-pistol, or my climbing-irons, or my South American blow-pipe, or my diver's suit that uncle John gave me last Christmas. And you mustn't look at my butterflies and moths unless I let you, or my beetles, or my . . ."

"Or your own bugs and fleas, I suppose," Viola burst in wrathfully. She felt her brother was surrendering too much even for the pleasure of hanging Harold for the murder in the Red Barn.

"I haven't got any bugs and fleas," Harold muttered, with a kind of sullen dignity.

"Yes, you have. You're swarming with them."

"Shut up, V, I tell you," her brother commanded fiercely. "If you don't shut up, I won't let you be Maria's ghost." He turned to his cousin with conciliation in his aspect. "All right, Harold, we won't touch any of your things. That's all you want, isn't it?"

But Harold, having by now apprehended from Bertram's mildness how indispensable he was to the performance, decided to demand something tangible. After all, the promises of a Bertram might not be kept when this passion to act Maria Marten's murder in the Red Barn had burnt itself out. What possession should he take this opportunity to grasp for himself?

"You must give me all your duplicates," he announced finally.

"But you don't collect stamps," Bertram objected, for he was genuinely dismayed by the prospect of parting with all his duplicates and thus being deprived of the joys of swopping for at least a couple of terms.

"Well, I've begun to collect them now," said Harold.

"Have you?" Viola exclaimed, leaping into the argument. "Then here are two for you." And first with her right foot and then with her left she stamped as hard as she could on Harold's toes.

At school Bertram had often played this unpleasant joke upon boys who seemed to have been brought into this world for no other purpose than to have such unpleasant jokes played upon them; but he had never seen it played with such exquisite appropriateness as on this occasion.

"You hurt me," said Harold bitterly, as he nursed his stamped-on toes.

"Good job I did hurt you, you greedy little cadger," she retorted.

By this time Bertram had begun to think that Harold's engagement at the cost of all his duplicate stamps was too high a price to pay even for the thrill of hanging him at the end of the play.

"Well, you needn't be hanged," he said abruptly. "We'll get somebody else. We'll get William. And he has leggings. So sucks to you, kiddy Harold."

"William won't let you hang him," Harold warned.

"Yes, he will," Viola contradicted. "Because I'll tell him he can kiss me if he lets Bertram hang him. And now we'll run after you whenever we see you. And we *will* laugh at you."

"Yes," her brother continued. "And we'll bag your air-gun, and we'll bag your blow-pipe, and we'll bag everything you've got."

Then Viola took up the curse.

"And we'll put wet sponges in your bed, and we'll set booby-traps for you wherever you go. And we'll dress up as ghosts and frighten you."

"No, no," muttered the wretched victim of this remorseless vengeance.

"And we'll dress up as demons and devils," Bertram went on. "And we'll make horrible noises outside your door in the middle of the night."

"You won't, you won't! I'll tell mother not to let you."

"She couldn't stop us," boasted Viola, "because we'd lock her in the coal-cellar."

"And we'll take your butterflies and moths, and your birds' eggs and beetles, and we'll upset your aquarium . . ."

"Or put ink into it," Viola suggested.

The last threat was too much for the miserable little naturalist. To save his freshwater snails, his sticklebacks and caddis-worms, he was willing to sacrifice everything.

"Well, I will let you hang me," he offered.

"Ah-ha, it's too late now," the author jeered.

"Bertram wouldn't hang you now if you knelt down and licked his boots and begged him to," Viola declared with disdain.

"Yes, do hang me," Harold moaned.

"We won't hang you for anything," Bertram repeated savagely.

"We won't! We won't!" Viola cried.

"But I want to be hanged. Oh, hang me, hang me!" the rejected actor half-sobbed. "I'll let you pull the rope quite tight. And I will let you put mother's shoe-bag round my head for the white cap." He had declined to allow this previously.

"We'll empty his aquarium into the stock-pot," Viola proclaimed, dancing some steps of the mazurka in exultation.

"No, no!" Harold bellowed despairingly. He increased his offers. "I'll tell you where there's a magpie's nest, and I'll lend you my climbing-irons to climb the tree and get the eggs."

"All right," said Bertram at last, "if you kneel down and say what I tell you to say, you *can* be hanged, and we won't empty your stinking aquarium into the stock pot."

Harold knelt.

"What must he say, V?" Bertram asked of his sister.

"He must say he's sorry for being such a greedy little beast."

"Go on, Harold," Bertram urged, prodding the penitent with his foot.

And Harold was taken through a series of humiliating assertions about his habits, his manners, his appearance and his morals, after which rehearsals for *The Murder in the Red Barn* proceeded smoothly, even merrily.

Eleanor arrived down from London on Sunday morning. Although she had had a most tiring week with three matinées, her energy seemed unimpaired. She was not optimistic about the future of the play in which she was acting, and said that if it ran till June she should be agreeably surprised. Her first thought when she arrived was for her daughter's dancing, and on learning that she had not practised once while she had been at Ambles she insisted on sitting down at the piano in the schoolroom and thumping out cachuchas, boleros, and fandangos till Viola's knuckles were sore with beating the tambourine, till her fingers ached with clapping castanets and her legs almost gave way beneath her.

"Oh, mother, I can't dance any more," she protested, "I'm tired."

"That's because you haven't practised," her mother retorted. "Come along now, once more that step."

However, Laurence rescued Viola from complete exhaustion by arriving downstairs in the schoolroom and asking if it would be possible for the noise to stop for a little while, as he found it impossible to concentrate upon *planchette* while his ears were being assailed by catchy melodies.

"*Planchette?*" repeated Eleanor. "You don't mean to say you've taken up with that rubbish?"

Laurence smiled tolerantly.

"Let me remind you, Eleanor, in the words of the immortal bard, 'there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dream'd of in your philosophy. So far indeed from wasting my time am I that already I have had the most remarkable results with what you call

ubbish. And that reminds me, Eleanor, did you very indly bring down the patterns I asked for ? "

" Laurence, I'm sorry, but I didn't get your note till esterday morning, and with a matinée yesterday I simply ad no time."

" You didn't get my telepathic message on Thursday nen ? "

" Did you wire ? I never had it."

" Not telegraphic, Eleanor, telepathic. I concentrated ntently on you for two hours on Thursday afternoon. lowever, I suppose you are not a good medium. I wish 'd written on Thursday now instead of trying to communiate with you by other means. Well, I must get back to ne spiritual world from which Viola's dancing temporarily istracted me. I'm on the verge of getting into touch ith a very interesting personality. Who knows, by the me we meet at lunch I may be able to surprise you, leanor. Yes, yes, indeed."

When, an hour afterwards, Laurence came in five minutes te for lunch, he was smiling to himself complacently.

" You look very pleased with yourself, Lorenzo," Hugh bserved.

" Well, I confess I have had what has been in its way uite a little triumph this morning. The fact is I have een talking to the Iron Duke. Yes, the great Duke of Vellington's spirit has been in my humble study since I w you last, Eleanor. As a matter of fact, when I came own to suggest that Viola's terpsichorean agility was little disturbing, I had already suspected merely by stinct that the Iron Duke was trying to communicate ith me. Hence my anxiety for absolute quiet. Ten inutes later the loudest rap I have yet heard resounded, bsolutely resounded from the upper part of my desk. Who is that ? ' I asked. A series of what I may describe almost frantic raps succeeded, and the pencil of *planette* began to draw a set of extraordinary rectangular gures. You can imagine that by this time I was quite xcited. I studied the paper and at once perceived that

the rectangular figures bore a remarkable resemblance to the plan of a battle such as you may see in history books. I hastily got down my historical atlas, and sure enough discovered that *planchette* had drawn an accurate plan of the action of Quatre Bras. 'Is that you, your Grace?' I asked. A terrific rap was the immediate response. 'Do you want anything?' Rap-rap-rap. By these I realized that not merely did the Duke want something, but that he wanted it urgently."

"Well, before you go on," James interrupted. "I want the mustard urgently. Do you mind passing it to me?"

Edith frowned kindly and raised a finger to her lips. She did not think that James quite appreciated what dear Laurence was telling him.

"'If you want anything, your Grace,' I continued 'do you think you can write it down through *planchette?*' The apparatus quivered for a minute under my touch and then began to write in an absolute phrenzy."

Laurence paused.

"And what do you think the Iron Duke wanted?" he asked solemnly.

"His boots," said Hugh.

"Hugo, Hugo, this is not a frivolous jape," said Laurence. "No, no. He wanted compulsory service. Yes, there is no doubt that the grand old Iron Duke who fought for us before does perceive the danger of refusing compulsory service. In fact I have already written off to Lord Roberts an account of my interview and I have ventured to send him a tracing of the words as written by his mighty predecessor. I told him, too, he was at perfect liberty to make any use of it in his campaign that he thought fit. But to my dying day I shall never forget the thrill I felt when I read in my own humble room that the Iron Duke was wanting compulsory service. It has filled me with awe. I shall now make an effort to get into touch with Lord Nelson and obtain from him an opinion about the scandalous laxity of the present Radical Government in

rying to evade its naval obligations. I only wish I had aken up spiritualism earlier."

At this point Frida whispered something to her mother.

"No, darling, father hasn't seen one," Edith replied oothingly.

"Well, I think spiritualism is just tommy-rot," declared Eleanor, challenging the table with her burning eyes.

But nobody took up the challenge, because everybody greed with her, everybody that is except Laurence, and e just smiled tolerantly.

That afternoon, while Eleanor was hard at work on the npacking, which had been waiting for her visit, the arrangements for the performance of *The Murder in the Red Barn* went forward.

For a long time now Bertram and Viola had made a habit f dressing up every Sunday afternoon and acting various ooks or historical incidents which had appealed to their ngenuity and fancy. Their exploits in this line were till spoken of with bated breath at Halma House, Earl's Court, and at their uncle John's house in Hampstead; ut they had never embarked upon an elaborate production ike this, so elaborate indeed as to require an audience. Usually they had been their own audience, for the spectators f their other efforts had rather resembled policemen on he outskirts of a popular demonstration which they might e called upon at any moment to disperse. Now, an udience meant the provision of an auditorium with footights and tickets of admission. None of the rooms in he house would provide this except at the expense of the tage. So the drama was billed to be enacted in the stableoft. The only person who flatly declined to wander out nto the night air and climb the ladder which led up through trap-door into the loft was George. He said that he had een the victim of such performances by his son and laughter for years and that, now there were other people o watch them, he intended to take a holiday. The truth vas, Eleanor had brought him down from town no less han half a dozen evening papers, and having spent a

harried day over the unpacking he preferred to spend a quiet evening in the slow absorption of their contents. Laurence had still a lingering interest in the drama, although the unseen world was fast obliterating that passion, and he occupied a prominent position in the middle of the front row to see, as he told his wife, what their little Frideswide was going to make of the part of Maria Marten. James had come, and he was in a really good temper, for he had snatched an opportunity to try the first scene of his own melodrama on Eleanor and had received from her such obviously genuine appreciation that he was beginning to build what he felt was likely to be a more durable castle in Spain than any he had hitherto designed. Huggins was present, with Mrs. Huggins and five young Hugginses. Even Mrs. Smith had been persuaded to abate for this evening her prejudice against the theatre; and of course Jane and Ethel, the two maids, were present, supported by Pobjoy and William.

There was a slight hitch at the beginning of the first act, because the curtain, after rising as lightly as Venus from the sea for several feet, became obstinate and suddenly descended with such rapidity as to extinguish all the footlights.

"They'll have the whole stable on fire before they've done, you mark my words, Mr. Huggins," the gloomy voice of Mrs. Smith was heard to prophesy from the darkness of the auditorium.

Huggins seemed to think there might be something in her pessimism. At any rate he came to the rescue of Bertram, who was trying simultaneously to hoist the curtain again and find William Corder's moustache, which had been swept from his face by the refractory curtain, together with the greater part of Goodman Marten's beard, which was now sticking to the curtain as fluff to the inside of a schoolboy's pocket.

However, with the help of Huggins, the stage was rendered visible again, and loud applause greeted the entrance of William Corder in a pair of Hugh's leggings

nd a tail-coat of his father's, which George was mercifully ot present to see sweeping the immemorial dust of this tage. In fixing his moustache after the hitch with the urtain, Bertram had managed to give it a permanent ant which lent him a finely diabolical appearance. Frida s the hapless heroine was apparently wearing one of er mother's chemises. With Viola's help and advice he had made an attempt to put up her hair, the effect f which was to give her the look of a timid Houdan ullet.

"Ere to-morrow's sun set, Maria, I wilt wed thee," er lover promised, with such a ferocious snarl that the pper half of his moustache curled like an asp about to trike.

"Oh, William, you have made me the happiest girl in uffolk," Frida gulped in a scarcely audible voice. Mother, mother, William has kindly promised to marry ie," she whispered to Viola, who as Dame Marten came obbling on at this moment, bent double and with one and pressed into the small of her back in the approved tyle of stage senility.

"Oh, grandma, what big eyes you've got!" shouted lugh from the back of the audience.

Bertram swung round so quickly to quell this disorderly arody of Red Riding Hood that the end of his moustache ent into his eye, and it was with genuine tears that he ssured Dame Marten of his intention to love her daughter ntil death should part him from her for ever. The ntrance of Maria's father, played by Harold in one of 'rida's smocked nightdresses, caused a good deal of merri- ient among the audience, because owing to the fact that 'iola was wearing his spectacles and that he was not, either of them saw so clearly as usual and collided in id-stage.

The next scene was the sinister Red Barn itself, and he realism of the setting was much applauded when 'illiam Corder was discovered with his arms crossed in an ttitude of truly appalling villainy.

"How long must pass ere Maria appear?" he demanded of the Furies. "I have been waiting for her since the clock in the belfry didst chime the hour of nine o'clock. Keep still, my heart, and do not beat so loud. Hark, by heavens, she comest! Oh, fiends of hell aid my purpose. Hold! Enough! She's here. Ah, Maria, what keptest you so long, my love? Did any prying eye see-est you as thou camest to the Red Barn? Speak, Maria."

Maria gulped and whispered in a faint voice that not a living soul had seen her pass.

"Look, Maria," said Corder with deadly cunning, "what is yon shadow I see upon the wall over there—I mean, over thither?"

Maria, all unsuspecting, looked away and gave William Corder an opportunity to draw Harold's vacuum-pistol.

"Die then, Maria; I wilt not marry thee," the recreant emitted with such force that the concentrated breath of his hatred blew a piece of his moustache off.

Now, Bertram at rehearsals had insisted that Frida was not to fall with a dying groan until the rubber-tipped arrow of Harold's vacuum-pistol caught her in the back. It had cost Bertram a good deal of eloquence to persuade her to stand still and receive this missile. In fact he had had to let Viola, Harold, and Frida herself fire at him from a distance twice as close as that from which he promised to fire at Maria Marten before Frida would allow him to shoot at her. Once, however, he had done it, and she had discovered that it did not hurt, she agreed to take the rubber-tipped arrow as her cue for groaning and falling down dead. So now when William Corder cried, "Die then, Maria, I wilt not marry thee," she waited obediently for the pistol to go off, and Maria did not die. William Corder frowned and muttered at her to pretend it had gone off. Frida, however, whose nerves were strung up to receive the charge in her back, did not understand what he wanted her to do instead.

William Corder, with a stifled oath, looked balefully at the rubber tip of the arrow protruding from the barrel, not

as the nervous tension of the stage wait relieved by Hugh's alling out from the audience :

" Why don't you murder her with Harold's blow-pipe ? "

William Corder, his finger on the trigger, turned round ercely at the interruption, and at that moment the istol decided to work, with the result that the rubber-pped arrow caught the would-be murderer a rousing blow n the chin. The surprise caused him to drop the pistol, nd, stung by the laughter of the audience, he decided o strangle his victim instead. Maria, unaware of the teration of her murderer's plan, let out a really convincing riek when William Corder sprang on her back and bore er to the ground. At every rehearsal her dying shriek ad sounded like an unoiled door being shut ; but this as a shriek of quality, and the actress's mother in the udience blanched.

" Oh, Laurence," she murmured, "he has really hurt er perhaps."

Luckily Huggins, when he came back from lowering the rtain, was able to reassure her that Miss Frida was all ght, or William Corder might have been prematurely nvicted of his crime.

The next scene was Dame Marten's dream of the burial her daughter's body. The reason for Bertram's choice the stable-loft was now apparent ; for, when the curtain se again and discovered Dame Marten snoring almost as udly as Beyle beside a fender, William Corder was seen be gradually lifting with a pickaxe a trap-door up stage. hen the excavation yawned suitably wide, he rolled the dy of Maria into it and the body vanished from sight nid loud applause from the audience.

" I suppose the poor child fell *on* to something ? " Edith ked anxiously.

" Oh, yes, Mrs. Armitage," Huggins reassured her. We put a truss of hay underneath, so she'll have fallen ce and comfortable."

William Corder shovelled some earth into the hole, osed the trap-door with his pickaxe, stamped ferociously,

and then, in order to show he was merely a figure in Dam Marten's dream without corporeal reality, made his exi backwards.

The old lady leapt up from her chair beside the fende and rushed about the stage without a sign of age o rheumatics, screaming :

"Help! Help! I have seen my beloved child clotte with gore, and the villi-anous Corder burying her in th Red Barn with a pickaxe. But no, no, it wast a dream."

This was the Goodman's cue, and Harold, hurryin on without his glasses, tripped over the fender, to fall wit a crash at his wife's feet. As he had winded himself an could only utter a series of unintelligible gasps an gurgles, the author signalled Huggins to bring down th curtain.

"You little ass," said Bertram, rushing on to the stag "you spoilt that scene. Why didn't you say, 'Heigh dame, what is the matter with thee? Why dostest . . dost . . . I mean . . . doth—I mean . . . oh, damn!"

But Harold was still so much winded that all he coul reply was :

"Goo-goo! Goo-ga! Goo-ga-ga-goo!"

"Oh, shut up making a noise like a dying duck in thunderstorm," said Dame Marten irritably, for the Gooc man had spoilt her curtain.

There was a longish wait before the next scene, whic was the condemned cell in the gaol of Bury St. Edmund because Bertram had to doff the clothes of William Cord and assume those of the hangman, while Viola had to pu on the blood-stained habiliments of Maria's ghost an Harold to dress himself as the murderer.

The problem of giving his rosy cheeks the right greenis tinge of the hangman's complexion had puzzled Bertra considerably. Finally, however, he managed to achiev a gruesome effect with diluted Reckitt's blue, and though lacked the Stilton cheese appearance of Mr. Cavendis Howard's hangman, it was reasonably ghastly. Viola, wit the help of brick-dust, red ink, and her mother's lip salv

looked like a walking butcher's shop, and Harold was so much frightened by her appearance before the curtain went up that there seemed every prospect of his redeeming the failure of his performance as Goodman Marten by a really convincing one as the haunted murderer. The only trouble was his moustache. Once Bertram had detached it from his own face, nothing would induce it to stick to Harold's.

"It's because your cheeks are so greasy," said the blood-stained ghost of Maria Marten scornfully.

"Well, that beard made me hot," said Harold.

"You can't have a moustache," Bertram decided finally, when what was now but a damp rat's-tail of hair slid off William Corder's face for the sixth time.

"Well, I want a moustache," said Harold in one of his fits of sullen obstinacy. "You had a moustache. Why can't I?"

"Because your face is so slippery, you sweaty little hog," said the blood-stained ghost of Maria, who was impatient to rise from her grave and frighten the audience. She felt fairly confident of eliciting a scream out of Jane and Ethel, and she had even a faint hope of making Mrs. Smith avert her gloomy countenance in horror.

"I'll tell you what," Bertram decided. "I'll cork one on."

By this time the audience had been waiting a quarter of an hour for the act to begin, and aunt Hilda actually had the odiously bad taste to put her head under the curtain and remind the actors that it was nearly twenty minutes to ten already and long after their bed-time.

"I can't find the burnt cork anywhere," said Viola at last. "But here's a piece of coal. If Harold licks his lips the black will stick on."

"Well, I won't have a moustache at all," said Harold, jibbing at the coal.

"Then why couldn't you say so at once, you silly little idiot?" she demanded angrily.

"Oh, do shut up, V," said the producer, who was

becoming temperamental under all this delay. "Go on, hurry up and get down underneath the trap-door. All right, Huggins, you can pull up the curtain now."

The murderer was discovered fast asleep; and certainly the change in his outward appearance since he had been condemned to death was remarkable, so remarkable indeed that the audience did not recognize him as William Corder at all, and James called out to know who this new character was.

"I'm William Corder, uncle James," said the condemned man, waking for a moment to establish his identity, and then hastily falling asleep again on catching sight of the author's outraged scowl in the wings.

Bertram had lighted a bull's-eye lantern to shed an unearthly light upon the blood-stained ghost of Maria when it rose from the ground. He also emitted a low monotonous humming sound, which was intended to evoke an apprehensive shudder from the audience. Whatever its effect upon the audience, it had a terrifying effect upon Frida, who darted out from behind the stage to seek protection in her mother's arms.

"Hullo, here's Maria Marten," said Hugh irreverently.

"Mother, I don't want to see the ghost who's coming now," Frida cried. "Hide me, hide me!"

Bertram, who was beginning to fear that the whole play would be wrecked by Frida's terror of her own ghost, stamped his foot to give the signal for the apparition to materialize. Slowly the trap-door opened; and the ghost, dripping with brick-dust, red ink, and lip salve, came slowly into view.

The actress's triumph was immediate and complete. Jane and Ethel let out a simultaneous yell and clung to the lapels of Pobjoy's coat. Four of the five little Hugginses hid under the form on which they were sitting, while the eldest of them remained miserably in his place, an expression upon his countenance of one who is about to take or who has just taken a dose of castor-oil. Mrs. Smith cried out that it was worse than an operation. Frida implored her

mother not to let her look and at the same time assured her that it was only Viola really.

"See, see," said the ghost, "see from whither my life's blood hath gushèd, see thy poor victim, William . . ."

At this point William in the audience was so much moved that he ejaculated "My gosh, I never done it!"

"See thy murdered Maria," the ghost continued, "who thou seducted without a pang."

"Go on, Harold, you fool; it's you now," urged the author in a hoarse whisper from the side.

But Harold was so much frightened by the thought of the ghost standing there that he kept his eyes tightly closed and would say nothing.

"William, see thy poor murdered Maria," the ghost repeated. "See the bleeding wounds thou madest with thy cruel hands."

But Harold declined to see them, and at the mention of the wounds shut his eyes tighter than ever. Viola, finding that she was incapable of making Harold display the right horror of the apparition, decided to display it for him. Gathering her breath, she let out a sudden and hitherto unrehearsed sepulchral wail which fetched Harold out of the chair in which he was sleeping and drove him off the stage altogether.

"Go back, you ass," said Bertram fiercely. And his attempts to get Harold back on the stage were like trying to serve a jelly on the point of collapse. "Go back," he threatened, "or Viola will dress up like that and come into your room to-night when you're really asleep."

But Harold would not go back. Instead, he followed the example of Frida by rushing into the audience and flinging himself into his mother's arms. Whereupon an infuriated hangman with a pale blue face, and a coil of rope over his arm, like a cowboy, came stamping across the stage, and croaking repeatedly:

"William Corder, prepare to die."

An equally infuriated ghost, oblivious of the nether world,

followed the hangman round, urging him in passionate whispers to go and drag that little funk to the scaffold.

"Hadn't I better drop the curtain, Master Bertram?" Huggins suggested, and without waiting for a reply he shut out from the audience the sight of the hangman's wrath.

In vain did the hangman presently come into the audience himself and argue that there was still the execution to come. Three aunts and a mother united to veto that execution.

"Poor little Frida's trembling like an aspen," Edith pleaded.

"Harold, pull yourself together," Hilda urged. "Remember how brave dear father always was."

"No, Vikins, you're too excited," said Eleanor. "It has been a splendid play, but you'll only spoil it by having an execution."

"But Pobjoy has built the scaffold. Haven't you, Pobjoy?" Bertram protested.

And then Beatrice said that it was quite time for the cakes and lemonade, which everybody seemed to think an unanswerable remark, for the audience at once began to disperse.

The effect of the performance of *The Murder in the Red Barn* might have gratified a much more ambitious playwright than Bertram. Frida had retired to bed in a state of considerable mental agitation. Although her mother was confident that her father had never seen a ghost and had even gone so far in expedient disloyalty to the head of the family as to assure her that he was never likely to see one, Frida could not but be uncomfortably aware of her father's preoccupation with the subject of ghosts. She had once or twice stolen into his study when he was not there, and she had turned over the pages of various books in which the most horrifying pictures of spiritual phenomena were shown. One in particular of ectoplasm issuing from a gentleman with side-whiskers caused her such tremors in the legs that she had to sit down on the floor with a bump.

Frida had been brought up to have a deep respect for her father, and it never entered her head to suppose that he would waste his time in studying fairy-tales. It had been her filial duty to tug away with her small fingers at the string of all the parcels which arrived for him, to loop the string into a neat little coil, to fold up the brown paper carefully, to put it away on a special shelf, and to place the books ready for him on his desk. During the last three days no less than fifteen packages of books had arrived at Ambles, and every single one of them was about ghosts or witches or sorcerers. The very thought of there being such books in the house was enough to frighten a child far less susceptible than Frida. And to-night she had to go to bed after seeing the blood-stained ghost of Maria Marten rise from the very hole into which she had been rolled as a corpse.

Edith realized that the nerves of her daughter were overstrung, and for a long while she sat beside the bed, reading to her the lenitive tale of *Little Women*, by Louisa M. Alcott. But it was nearly midnight before Frida fell asleep and her mother was able to go off to bed herself. She found Laurence standing in front of the long glass in the wardrobe, and just as she was going to tell him what a time she had had with poor little Frida, he put a finger to his lips and beckoned her to approach.

"Stand beside me, Edith," he bade, "and tell me if you can discern a shadowy form looking over my shoulder. This is, in sooth, a most interesting experiment."

"Laurence, do let me beg of you not to make these experiments at this time of night. They really upset my nerves," his wife protested in what for her were tones of real petulance.

"Come, come, Edith, that is not the brave attitude I expect from you. I had no idea until this week that I possessed such remarkable occult gifts. Do you not think that it is my duty to devote them to the service of a doubt-distracted world? Would you not feel proud if it fell

to my lot to bridge the gulf between the world we know and the unseen, unknown world of spirits ? "

" But, Laurence, you used to do that so beautifully in your sermons, before you had all those difficulties with the Bishop about your beliefs."

Laurence held up a white hand.

" Please, please, Edith, do not let us retrace our steps. I have advanced far, far beyond those petty doctrinal disputes in which I was involved by old-fashioned ecclesiastical prejudice. Forgive me, if I remark that your attitude is a little discouraging for a husband who may be in his own way a pioneer. I asked you to come and stand beside me in front of this glass because I wanted your frank opinion whether or no a shadowy form was looking over my right shoulder. In all psychical research, Edith, the evidence of eye-witnesses is invaluable. Some of us in our enthusiasm may be misled into too hasty an attribution to the influence of spirits what is no more than an optical delusion, or even a manifestation easily explicable by the circumstances in which it—ah—manifests itself."

Edith found all these long words rather tiring after reading *Little Women* to a nervous daughter for about an hour and a half. She yawned.

" You are evidently tired, Edith," said her husband, with a hint of criticism in his tone.

" I am, dear, a little. It was poor little Frida. She must never again act in such a play. I should never have allowed her even to see it had I known how blood-curdling it was going to be. And while I am on the subject, dear, I hope you will not mind my suggesting that I think it would be better if you did not let Frida know anything about your own . . ."

Edith paused. She feared Laurence might be offended if she called his spiritualistic studies a hobby.

" I have not let her know anything," said Laurence patiently.

" No, dear, but you have given her your parcels of books to unpack, and I gather she has peeped between the covers

once or twice and seen some rather horrifying illustrations. So, to oblige me, dear, I do hope you will let me undo your parcels just for the present while you are getting together your works of reference."

"I do not think Frida will suffer any hurt from the truth, Edith. I confess I am an opponent of the educational theory which seeks to shut out the young from the wider fields of human knowledge."

Edith yawned again.

"However," he went on, "as I see that you are quite incapable in your exhausted state of appreciating my point of view, I think it will be wiser to resume this little discussion when you're feeling refreshed by a night's sleep. I suggest that you nip into bed quickly, my dear, and leave me to decide without your assistance whether or no from time to time a shadowy form is looking over my right shoulder."

"Laurence dear," she protested, with a definite note of peevishness in her voice, "you cannot expect me to go to sleep if you are going to stand there staring into the glass in that uncomfortable way. It makes me feel quite jumpy."

"Jumpy is hardly the word to describe human nature's awe of the unseen world. I can understand anybody feeling jumpy because there is a rat scratching behind the wainscot . . ."

"Laurence, please," his wife begged.

"Or a black-beetle in rapid transit across the carpet . . ."

"Laurence, I really must beg you not to talk like that."

"My dear, your nerves are in such a queer condition to-night that I think we must ask good Doctor Brewer to send you a bottle of tonic. I have not seen you so 'jumpy,' as you call it, since that dreadful cook of ours at Newton Candover was so inebriated that she cooked and served the lunch backwards on the last occasion that the Bishop gave Confirmation in my parish. I have sometimes wondered if that—ah—tipsy-turvy lunch, which began,

if you remember, with bananas and ended with Palestine soup, had anything to do with the way he treated me later on over that sermon of mine upon the Virgin Birth. But these are indeed idle speculations. Fortunately I have a more fruitful field for speculation with my researches into the great problem of personal survival after death. Well, well, Edith, I don't suppose you meant to spoil my absorbing experiment, but I fear that your conversation has driven away my ghostly visitant for to-night at any rate."

With these words Laurence ceased to stare fixedly into the glass of the wardrobe and was not long in getting into bed himself.

Soon he and Edith were asleep, as indeed was everybody else at Ambles. In one room the snores of James in his bed were being answered by the snores of Beyle in his basket. Eleanor worn out by unpacking was sleeping so profoundly that the tuba-like snores of George in the bed beside her did not even cause her to stir uneasily. Hugh was asleep, and not, as he deserved to be, burnt to death by the cigarette-end which had slipped from his mouth on to the floor. Hilda was asleep, and some but not all of the irritable wrinkles had been smoothed from her forehead. Mrs. Smith was asleep. So were Jane and Ethel. So were Bertram and Viola. So was Harold. So were the inmates of Harold's aquarium. From far away the sound of the clock in Wrottesford steeple striking the hour of two travelled across the dark windless country-side.

And then Frida had her nightmare. In two hours the soothing effect of *Little Women* by Louisa M. Alcott had entirely worn off. Her legs began to shoot out convulsively in different directions. Low moans proceeded from beneath the bedclothes. Her face, particularly her nose, began to twitch. A thin arm emerged and beat upon the outside of the bed. Finally, with a scream that would have frozen the marrow of a stoker in the middle of the Red Sea, she leapt up and fled upstairs to find her mother, shrieking at the pitch of her lungs that there was blood

over everything. In her terror she rushed into Harold's room for a moment by mistake, who leapt out of bed himself as soon as she came in and with even louder yells than Frida's tried to make for his mother's room downstairs. He was fleeing from the ghost of Maria Marten, for it was thus he beheld the white form of the distracted Frida; but, blinded by fear and the failure to put on his spectacles, instead of going into Hilda's room he missed the stairs and rushed shrieking into the maids' room. Jane and Ethel, who had retired to rest somewhat shaken themselves by the evening's entertainment, did not wait to identify the apparition, but plunged out of bed with only one idea between them and that was to escape out of the house altogether. By this time everybody had been woken up, and on reaching the landing below Jane and Ethel found it thronged with figures in dressing-gowns of every hue. Even George, looking like a Roman emperor in purple, was out of bed and about the house.

And then Harold came bellowing down the stairs behind Jane and Ethel.

"What's the matter, Harold, what's the matter?" his mother besought.

"The ghost of Maria Marten came into my room and said the house was dripping with blood," Harold sobbed.

This set Jane and Ethel off again. Sitting down upon the stairs they screamed away at one another, locked in an hysterical embrace.

"This is some trick that Bertram and Viola have been playing," Hilda declared.

"Well, if it is . . ." said George, stooping to take off his slipper, but he might have spared himself so much effort. It was not a trick of Bertram and Viola. Bertram and Viola were both, even to the sceptical eyes of Hilda, obviously fast asleep. Something attempted, something done (in spite of the reprieve of William Corder at the last moment) had earned them a night's repose, and with gentle regular breathing they were enjoying it.

"However," said Laurence next morning, "I do not

regret being woken up by poor little Frida, for in order to quieten the child I agreed to vacate my own bed and leave her to the care of her mother. Consequently I have made the discovery that her room is most undoubtedly haunted, and that what we mistook for a common or garden nightmare was in effect a genuine visitation by some spirit of whose friendship or hostility I am still in doubt. However, *en avant*, as our friends across the Channel say. You may rely on me to probe this mystery to the bottom. I shall move down my impedimenta to-night."

"For goodness' sake, Laurence," Hilda begged, "don't let the maids hear you talking like that. I'm expecting Jane and Ethel to give notice as it is, and if they hear a rumour that Ambles is haunted they certainly will."

"So be it, Hilda," he graciously intoned, "your word is law where these matters of grave domestic import are concerned."

"And I hope, Eleanor," Hilda continued, "that you will forbid in future anything like a repetition of last night's performance. Harold shuddered without stopping from the time he got into bed with me until six o'clock this morning, and Edith cannot even leave Frida now but has had to have her breakfast sent up to her."

"Oh, I think the kiddies all enjoyed themselves," said Eleanor. "It was just bad luck that one of Laurence's bogies should go and frighten his own daughter. It won't do to make molly-coddles of them."

"It's all very well for you, Eleanor," Hilda snapped. "You're going back to London this afternoon."

"Well, you won't have much more of my two terrors. They'll be going back to school in another ten days."

But after breakfast Hugh took Eleanor into the garden and put before her his plan of education. At first she was inclined to pooh-pooh the notion that he was serious. It sounded beautifully easy, but wait till he had been teaching them for a week. He would be sick to death of it.

"And though I may seem very Bohemian and all that

Hugh, I'm quite a good sensible mother really, and I'm letermined they shall have a proper education. Johnnie has offered to pay for good boarding-schools, and I'm not going to risk offending him."

"Well, let them have this spring and summer anyway," Hugh urged. "It'll do them no end of good to be in the country, and if I can only get the others out of Ambles, look what an occupation it will be for George to help me run our hotel."

"A lot of help George will be," said George's wife.

"Well, my notion was to keep him as a kind of advertisement. When new guests come and see George sitting about looking so quiet and contented and plump and rosy, they'll be prejudiced in favour of the place from the start. I know if I went to an hotel and saw George sitting in the lounge I should book rooms for a month."

"Don't be such an ass, Hugh."

"No, I'm not ragging. Really, I mean it. I'm sure I'll get rid of the others this summer; and if I don't, well, it won't have done Bertram and Viola any harm to have been in my charge for a few months."

"I'm not so sure of that, Hughie."

"Then next September, which is the proper time to start, they can both go to boarding-school, because if my plan comes off Ambles will be in the hands of workmen during the winter. Be a sport, Eleanor. I'll make special rates, and Johnnie won't mind paying a bit less. Then you can ask him for a bit more later on."

In the end Eleanor, who was not feeling too sure of her engagement and who did not know of any boarding-schools to which her son and daughter could go next term, agreed to leave their education for the present to Hugh.

"I thought I'd charge twenty pounds each for tuition," Hugh suggested. "Johnnie's solicitors won't kick at that. And frankly I shall find the money useful."

"Well, you and George must share the responsibility," he told him. "Johnnie was always much more nasty and bitter about me than anybody else."

Hugh was less successful with Hilda.

"Let you teach Harold?" she scoffed. "Why, Harol has forgotten more than you ever knew."

"Are you going to send him to a boarding-school?"

"That's my business," she replied tartly.

Two days later Laurence announced that he was goin to give lessons to Harold and Frideswide.

"Supervise perhaps would be the juster word," h added, "for I do not propose to employ the dusty para phernalia of the class-room. We shall have no blackboard No, no, I have my own ideas about education. Harold an I are hoping to embark upon the devious ways of Gree grammar. I quite look forward to our labours. I expec great things from Harold. Yes indeed, I see scholarship looming."

CHAPTER XI

HAROLD'S POSTCARD

BY the end of June Hugh came to the conclusion that he had completely miscalculated the ease with which he had expected to get rid of the other owners of Ambles. After some three months of community existence, there was not one of them who did not give the impression of being established there for good. His plan for turning the house into an hotel seemed at this date much further away from realization than when he had first broached it to George over the end of his bed that April morning. To be sure, the pigs had grown considerably, but the amount they now ate was so large that it was becoming a strain on Hugh's finances to supply them.

"They eat more than Harold," he complained to George one day.

"I quite believe it," his partner replied. "I thought you were being rather optimistic over the profits. And the worst of it is they'll just go on eating more and more until you kill them in desperation, after which you'll find that your bacon is costing you three times as much as if you had bought it at the grocer's. Moreover, you'll have so much of it that you'll never want to taste bacon again for the rest of your life. That's pig-keeping."

"Yes, but if Laurence hadn't played us that trick by starting his infernal school," Hugh said, "I should have been able to get twice as much out of Johnnie's solicitors for the kids' education. But he cramped my style by offering to do it gratis. I had to make a cut price."

"Ah, there you are," said George. "There's always something goes wrong. That's what I found when I used to bet regularly."

"I made sure I'd have shifted Laurence out of here before now," Hugh grumbled.

"I didn't," George said. "What beats me is how the Bishop of Silchester ever shifted him out of that living. He must be a remarkable man. Thank God, though, Laurence took up with this blithering spiritualism. I'd sooner he bored the ghost of Napoleon Bonaparte than me. What I went through when he thought he was going on the stage. . . ." George shook his head at the memory. "Yes, on the whole we can consider ourselves lucky. Teaching Harold and Frida keeps him fairly quiet, and messing about with these wretched ghosts occupies him for the rest of the time."

"I ought to have persevered with my first plan," Hugh said regretfully. "He couldn't have held out indefinitely against a flavour of bitter aloes in everything he ate. But I reckoned on working that table-turning business and having him out of here long before this. But whenever I tried to swing the table to say what I wanted, the blighter used to sing out 'Hostile influences at work this evening,' and call the séance off. The only thing is he's getting that child of his in such a state of nerves that she'll go dotty presently. I warned Edith she ought to take her away, and I think Edith herself is getting a bit worried about it. But though I believe we might get rid of Edith and Frida for a time, what's the use of that if Laurence hangs on?"

"No use at all," said George decidedly.

"And then there's James," his brother continued. "I don't know what you think, but my impression is that James is settling down here for life. I asked him about his new paper the other day, and he told me he had given up the notion now. He and Beatrice will be able to live here comfortably for three years on the thousand pounds Johnnie gave him, with what he makes out of journalism

as well. Of course, I haven't had a shot at getting Hilda out yet, but I have a plan for her. Still, it's not a plan I can absolutely count upon. It's rather too complicated. You see, Bertram has a friend called Higginbotham whose father's governor or something of British Honduras. Now, my idea was to have this youth down here and get him to invite Harold out to British Honduras, and then kidnap Harold and give Hilda the idea that he's in British Honduras. That would get Hilda out to British Honduras in search of Harold. And then when she got there we'd cable to her that we were sending Harold over by the next boat to join her. I admit it sounds a little complicated."

"Complicated?" George repeated. "Why, it's more complicated than my knitting was after that vile dog of James's dragged it all round the garden the other day."

"I decline to be put off this plan," said Hugh firmly. "I've been weak over the bitter aloes, but I'm going to stick to this and carry it through. I want to make us independent, George."

"Well, if you can find the double for the Cesarewitch and the Cambridgeshire we shall be, and it ought to be a deuced sight easier to do that than it will be to get Hilda and Harold out to British Honduras. That's what I said to that fellow Laurence last week. I said, 'If your blessed spiritualism was any good, you'd be able to find out what two horses to back for the autumn double.' And what do you think that sublime clown replied?"

"Don't ask me."

"He said: 'I probably can.' That to me who started trying to get that double in the year 1889 and have been trying every year since! Oh, by the way, I had a letter from Eleanor this morning. She says that play she's in is coming off in a fortnight. Still, it's had a better run than I expected. She'll stay down here for a bit, of course."

"Well, that'll relieve me of the responsibility of seeing that Viola practises her dancing," said Hugh.

In justice to Hugh it must be made clear that he had superintended the education of his nephew and niece with genuine conscientiousness, even to the extent of sitting with a watch in his hand and timing Viola through her repertory every day.

"I say, you make me feel tired out, uncle Hugh," she had told him.

"I know, it's the only consolation I have for sitting here and listening to you thumping that infernal tambourine."

This was not entirely true. Hugh had another consolation, which was that Viola's dancing practice annoyed everybody else in the house rather more than it annoyed him.

On the whole, the two months that succeeded the excitements of Easter had passed by comfortably enough. Indeed, if Hugh had never conceived the idea of turning Ambles into an hotel, he would probably by now have given up the idea of eliminating the others. The process of educating Bertram and Viola, although it irked him sometimes, did keep him regularly occupied, and their devotion made his task as easy as such a task could ever be. He had done well, too, over the Touchwood Museum for of the fifty pounds John had allotted to the foundation of it, Hugh had managed to secure forty-five pounds for himself. Still, the future was not satisfactory. By the end of June he would be called upon to make a quick decision about going out to grow mahogany with Mr Sydney Ricketts in British Honduras. This he had no intention of doing; but he disliked very much the notion that his refusal would endow Harold with two thousand pounds at five per cent. compound interest in another five years' time.

"Look here, Hilda," he said to his sister, "what's going to be done about this British Honduras business? I'm not going out there."

"Nor is Harold," she snapped.

"You're quite clear about that?"

"Perfectly clear."

"Well, don't you think you'd better put it down in writing?"

"Why should I?"

"Well, I'm to notify John's solicitors at the end of this month whether I'm going out or not, and if I don't go the two thousand, which has already been paid to that lantern-jawed, leather-necked, blue-nosed bounder Mr. Sydney Ricketts, is to remain at five per cent. compound interest for the next five years, when Harold is to join him as a pupil-partner. But if you don't intend Harold shall take up this job, why should Mr. Sydney Ricketts have the use of the money? Don't you think we'd better come to some private arrangement?"

Hilda looked at her brother suspiciously. In her experience Hugh's private arrangements only benefited himself.

"I don't see what you and I can do," she said. "This is entirely a matter for John and his solicitors."

"All right, Hilda," her younger brother threatened, "if you won't come to terms with me, I'll take the job myself. I daresay Ricketts will be quite glad to buy me out at a discount."

"But you'll have to go to British Honduras," she said vindictively.

"That won't worry me," he replied with exasperating calm. "I needn't stay there."

Hilda thought for a few moments over this threat, and the longer she thought, the further away from Harold receded that sum of money invested by John in the mahogany business of Mr. Sydney Ricketts.

"What do you suggest then?" she asked at last.

"This is my suggestion," said Hugh. "I will write to the solicitors and formally surrender my claim to the two thousand pound partnership which stands at present in my name. You will at the same time write and formally notify them that in five years' time Harold will take it up. Then you will enter into a private arrangement, properly

drawn up of course by a Wrottesford solicitor, by which you agree to share with me that two thousand or anything that may accrue from it. Suppose, for instance, mahogany should go up? That two thousand may be worth ten thousand. You never know. In such a case I shall want my half share."

"Yes, but suppose it doesn't go up?" Hilda countered. "That would mean poor little Harold would only have a miserable thousand pounds in the business."

"But I'm assuming you don't intend Harold to be a mahogany planter," he said. "I'm assuming that in five years' time the two thousand at compound interest will be available. In that case I want half. The thing is perfectly simple. What are you shying at? If you don't agree, I'll manage somehow to get the lot, even if I have to go out for a while to British Honduras in order to do it. But I don't want to go out there. My ambition is centred on home industries. So I make you a sporting offer. The only thing is you've got to decide quickly, because in another week the business will have to be settled."

"I wish I had somebody to consult," Hilda sighed.

"Go and ask George's advice."

"George! You know he's hand and glove with you."

"Well, ask James. Ask Laurence. Ask one of Laurence's blithering spooks. It doesn't matter a damn to me. But if you don't come to this arrangement with me, you won't see a farthing of that money. I promise you that. You know the terms of John's letter. You can't get over that. If I accept, the money is mine, and you can trust me to deal with that sun-dried, scraggy, flop-eared bounder, Mr. Sydney Ricketts. You may think you'll get the money out of John for Harold in any case. Don't be too sure, Hilda. Johnnie is married now. In five years' time he may have four little Harolds of his own prattling round his knee. I wouldn't count on another two thousand for your glass-eyed angel, if I were you."

So in the end, after thinking the matter over, Hilda decided to share Harold's prospects with his uncle. John's solicitors were notified that Hugh did not intend to take up his option and that Harold did. A deed was then executed by which Hilda bound herself in her own name and in the name of Harold as his guardian to make over to Hugh half of whatever might accrue in the future from that two thousand pounds invested in the mahogany plantations of Mr. Sydney Ricketts.

Hugh was easier in his mind when this was settled. It had depressed him greatly to think of surrendering all that money to Harold. He felt fairly confident now that, if he could only get the rest of them out of Ambles, he should be able to persuade John to finance his scheme for an hotel in return for surrendering all claims on Harold's money.

"Well, Hugh," James said to him on the day this legal business was completed. "I don't think Johnnie meant to do me a good turn last April, but there's no doubt living down here has done me an enormous amount of good."

"You're not thinking of going back to London yet?"

James shook his head.

"Hugh, I'm bitten by the hope of making a fortune," he announced.

"Who isn't?" the younger brother asked.

"Hugh," James went on, rubbing his hands together in satisfaction, "I've finished my play. It's the most appalling tosh you can imagine."

"You don't really think so," said Hugh. "You're smirking like Laurence."

"Well, to be honest, perhaps I do think it has the making of a popular appeal. Eleanor is to blame partly. I sent her the first three acts to read, and she raised my hopes. For years now I have made a habit of reading what I write to Beatrice, and for years Beatrice has loyally tried to understand and shamelessly pretended to like what I have written. She did neither. Nor did

the public. This play Beatrice has devoured. Beatrice *is* the public. Hugh, I have visions."

"My god," Hugh exclaimed, "there's something queer about this house. Laurence sees ghosts in it. You see a successful play. George sees the winner of the autumn handicaps. And, when you come to think of it, it must have been here that Johnnie saw his secretary as his wife."

"And you see a fortune out of pigs," James added.

Hugh frowned.

"Not at the rate those six pigs of ours have taken to eating. Still," he murmured pensively, "I have my own visions."

It was about a week after Hilda and Hugh had come to terms over the money that on a hot July morning word came to Ambles that a canoe, carriage paid, had arrived at Wrottesford station, and was waiting there to be called for.

The day before, John Touchwood and his wife had reached Niagara on their way to start the Canadian tour on which they had decided before returning to England. They had performed all the tricks which tourists are expected to perform at Niagara. Clothed in oilskins they had been soaked by the spray, and they had not escaped being photographed.

"I wonder if that Canadian canoe has arrived at Ambles yet," John had remarked to his wife. "I'll bet there has been some trouble if it has."

"John, my dear, I think I'll soon have to read you a lecture on vindictiveness. It's really rather shocking the way you gloat over possible discomforts and misfortunes for that poor family of yours."

"I haven't forgiven them yet," he had replied frankly.

"I think it's time you did."

But the reproof had been lost on John, who owing to the roar of the falling water had not heard what Doris had said.

Presently they had reached a relatively quiet corner where she had returned to the subject of nursing hatred and malice.

"You know you deliberately had that canoe built in order to cause trouble."

"I know I did," he had admitted with the grin of a schoolboy. "I felt sure that Harold would upset in it, and that, if he didn't upset himself, Bertram and Viola would be sure to upset him. In fact, I'm rather hoping that one by one the whole of my relations will upset in it. I'm picturing them permanently saturated, as wet in fact as we shall be if we stay here much longer looking at these Falls, which personally I find rather dull. I'd as soon spend my life watching a bath being filled. In fact that would be a more amusing pastime, because the bath would overflow, but these Falls just go on falling. I don't wonder people feel they must walk across them on tight-ropes and roll down them in barrels. If I look at them much longer I shall want to do something desperate to relieve the monotony of this view."

"I didn't hear much of that, John," his wife had laughed. "What did you say?"

"I said, 'Let's stop looking at this super-bath-tap and get on to Quebec,'" he had roared above the roar of the water.

But John had been right in supposing that the canoe was likely to be a disruptive force. Advice to paddle one's own canoe may be good, but when the ownership of that canoe is in doubt such advice is an incentive to war. John in his letter of the first of April had had a hit at George's hypochondria by saying that, if he still hankered after a sea voyage, the river with Harold and himself in a Canadian canoe would give him all the nautical adventure he required. *My solicitors*, he had added, *have been instructed to place a canoe at his disposal.*

In the business of dividing up the house and settling into it this canoe had been forgotten, as no doubt the Touchwood Museum would have been forgotten if Hugh had not seen the way to pick up a handy forty-five pounds out of it for himself. Solicitors, however, forget nothing, at any rate nothing for which they can possibly charge

their clients. No doubt John's bill of costs would contain something like this :

Reading and discussing your instructions with regard to a Canadian canoe to be placed at the disposal of George Touchwood, Esq., of Ambles, near Wrottesford, Hants, and Harold Curtis, Esq., of the aforesaid place of residence	3s. 6d.
Writing a long letter to Messrs. Bewick and Jones, Boatbuilders, Hampton Court, asking them to supply an estimate for building the aforesaid Canadian canoe .	3s. 6d.
Writing a letter acknowledging the receipt of an estimate from Messrs. Bewick and Jones	3s. 6d.
Writing a letter to Messrs. Bewick and Jones asking them to make an appointment to discuss the estimate . . .	3s. 6d.
Writing a letter to Messrs. Bewick and Jones suggesting that our Mr. Hunter should visit their Yard at Hampton Court to discuss the estimate for proposed canoe	3s. 6d.
Writing a letter to Messrs. Bewick and Jones informing them that our Mr. Hunter would visit them at twelve noon on May 3rd	3s. 6d.
Our Mr. Hunter's journey to attend on Messrs. Bewick and Jones at their Yard at Hampton Court, and long discussion with them about proposed canoe . . .	£3 3s.0d.

Writing a long letter to Messrs. Bewick and Jones pointing out that the estimate of £28 10s. for building a Canadian canoe to your order was excessive . . . 3s. 6d.

Writing a letter to Messrs. Bewick and Jones to offer £26 15s. in reply to one from them offering to build the proposed canoe for £27 15s. Specifying at the same time that the sum of £26 15s. was to include all accessories provided for in the original estimate . . . . . 3s. 6d.

Writing a letter to Messrs. Bewick and Jones accepting their offer to build for £27 15s. a Canadian canoe according to the specifications of their estimate. . . 3s. 6d.

But there are some subjects too painful even for the lack of reticence which marks the literary fashion of the moment, and among these are the bills of costs of solicitors. It would be unseemly to darken this light-hearted tale with any more of the fleecing of Lamb's Conduit Street. Let us leave the rest of that bill of costs to the imagination, with the comparatively cheerful reflection that at any rate John Touchwood would not be called upon to read through the depressing document and find at the end of it that he must add 33⅓ per cent. of profit costs as allowed by the Supreme Court of Judicature pursuant to the Solicitors' Remuneration Act of 1925.

Perhaps the anxiety of remembering to charge for all the letters they had written to Messrs. Bewick and Jones led John's solicitors to forget, by the time they wrote their last one instructing the builders to forward the canoe by rail, carriage paid, to Wrottesford Station, L.S.W.R., for whom the canoe was primarily intended. At any rate, they wrote to Messrs. Bewick and Jones and instructed them to dispatch the canoe to Harold Curtis,

Esq., of Ambles, near Wrottesford, Hants, although throughout the correspondence they had previously referred to the canoe as being intended for George Touchwood, Esq., of the aforesaid address. So it was Harold who received the card from the railway company notifying him of the canoe's arrival.

There was no doubt for whom the card was intended. Nothing could have been clearer than *Mr. Harold Curtis* on the address side. What was not at all clear, however, was the kind of article that was waiting for him at the railway station. The card was passed round the breakfast-table, and no two people agreed what the pale grey squiggle of handwriting in the heart of a maze of print was intended to suggest.

"It's only one of whatever it is," said Hilda, "otherwise I should have read it as *lemon*. But nobody would send a single lemon to Harold by rail."

"I don't know so much about that," said Hugh. "Somebody may have felt it was the only way he could express what he felt about Harold."

"Don't mind, Harold," said kind aunt Edith; "uncle Hugh is only joking. And I don't believe it *is* lemon. I think it is more like *lasso*. Do you think some friend of poor Daniel's could have sent him a lasso?" she asked.

"Well, it looks like *cannon* to me," said James.

"What a noisy present!" Beatrice observed doubtfully.

Harold hurried round the table to gaze at the squiggle through his glasses in the hope of being able to convince himself that it really was *cannon*. But he had inherited from his father the exact observant mind of the naturalist, and he could not convince himself that it was *cannon*.

"I think perhaps it's *barrow*," he said, after a struggle with his unscientific self.

"But who would send you a barrow, dear?" his mother asked.

Bertram snatched the card from his cousin.

"It's not *barrow*, you ass. It's *bassoon*."

"Don't take my card," said Harold, snatching it back aggressively. In the presence of his mother he could afford to be aggressive. And in any case the reception of the card from the railway company had made him feel several years older.

"Bassoon! What a stupid suggestion, Bertram," said Hilda coldly. "Who is likely to send Harold a bassoon?"

"Perhaps it's *basin*," suggested Viola, on fire to avenge the snub to her brother. "Somebody may have thought he ate too much and sent him a basin to be sick into."

"Viola, if you talk like that," said her aunt, "I shall send you out of the dining-room to eat the rest of your breakfast in the hall."

"Well, I've eaten my breakfast already."

"Viola, do not be insolent. You are getting completely out of hand since you left school. I'm only thankful your mother will be down here soon. I'm sure she'll be horrified to see the way your manners have deteriorated even during the last few weeks."

And, of course, the whole point of what she was saying was lost, as Hilda complained to Edith afterwards, because in the middle of it Hugh had given one of his vulgar winks, which had made Viola grin like some common street-child.

Just then Laurence entered the dining-room rather later than usual, for he had been wrestling until the small hours with the powers of darkness.

"Here's the man who'll tell us what it is," Hugh exclaimed. "He'll tell us what any hieroglyphic is after his practice with *planchette*."

"What is that?" Laurence intoned, when the card was put before him. "Why, that is *carrot*, of course."

There was a loud burst of laughter from Hugh and his scholars.

"And what," Laurence inquired, "what is there in my reading of the word to excite so much mirth from

Bertram and Viola? May I trouble somebody to explain the humour of it, and may I trouble you, Edith, to pour me out a cup of coffee?"

However, when he heard that some article, carriage paid, was waiting for Harold at the station Laurence admitted that possibly he had misread the word, and after another examination of the card he decided that it was *lamb*, a moment later that it was *laurel*, and finally that it was *larva*.

"Somebody knowing your enthusiasm for lepidoptera, Harold, must have sent you a rare larva for your museum."

"But a larva is a caterpillar, uncle Laurence."

"I know that, Harold. As your pastor and master perhaps you will allow me to have a nodding acquaintance with the language we both speak."

"But would a caterpillar come by train?" Harold asked.

"Why not?" his uncle replied with arched eyebrows. "I know of no by-law which prohibits the transport of caterpillars by our railway companies."

"Perhaps it's such a lot of caterpillars that they can't come with the postman?" Harold suggested.

"Perhaps it is," Laurence agreed with gracious severity. "Do my eyes deceive me," he went on, "or is that a dish of scrambled eggs in front of Hugh?"

"It may be," said Hugh, "or it may be an omelette. If you want to be absolutely sure you'll have to ask Mrs. Smith."

"Don't listen to Hugh, Laurence," said Hilda pettishly. "Mrs. Smith's scrambled eggs are delicious."

"I never said they weren't," Hugh retorted. "What I said was that you could not tell the difference between her scrambled eggs and her omelettes."

"Or perhaps it's a breeding-cage full of caterpillars," Harold began again.

"That's enough, dear, for the present about your card," his mother interposed. "Whatever it is, we must just wait patiently and see what it is when it arrives."

If George had been at breakfast he might have been able to solve the problem of that grey squiggle of ink. A week ago he had received a letter from Messrs. Bewick and Jones, boatbuilders, of Hampton Court, to say that the Canadian canoe placed at his disposal by Messrs. White, Howard, Hunter, Howard and Kemp, of 241 Lamb's Conduit Street, W.C., had now completed building and would be dispatched by rail, carriage paid, immediately.

It was after this that John's solicitors had written a letter instructing Messrs. Bewick and Jones to send the canoe to Harold Curtis, Esq., and since Messrs. Bewick and Jones did not charge three and sixpence for every letter they wrote they had not bothered to send a second notification.

George had been puzzled for a minute to know why he should be presented with a canoe, and then he remembered his brother's letter. Thinking to himself that the canoe would keep Bertram and Viola occupied, he had torn the letter up and forgotten all about it. By the time he came downstairs that July morning Harold had already driven off with Pobjoy in the dog-cart to fetch what it had finally been decided was a consignment of caterpillars in a case too large to go through the post. Naturally George did not connect such a case with his canoe, nor when the others began to speculate what was keeping Harold so long in Wrottesford did George suppose that it was the problem of transporting his canoe out to Ambles. Comparative peace still brooded over the mellow old house. The ship which was to launch a thousand faces had not yet arrived. The great argument over the ownership of the canoe had not yet been dreamed of. There was, indeed, a feeling of resentment among the scholars of Hugh's school that a scholar of the rival school should have received a card from the London and South Western Railway to tell him that there was a parcel waiting for him at Wrottesford station, because on such occasions Harold became extremely pompous.

"Anybody would think you were the only person in the world who had ever had a parcel," Bertram had told him bitterly just before he set out to redeem it.

"Well, this isn't a parcel," Harold had replied in a maddeningly quiet tone of complacency. "And you never had a card from the railway to say something was waiting for you."

"I could if I liked."

But Bertram had not thought this retort worthy of his wit, and the recognition of its feebleness had added the final touch of bitterness to watching the self-important departure of Harold for Wrottesford seated beside Pobjoy in the dog-cart.

"I'll show you my caterpillars when I come back with them, Bertram," were Harold's last words as Pobjoy shook the reins and the chestnut mare leapt forward.

"Go and get your carrot, Neddy," Bertram had yelled after him; but Harold's glasses were already flashing round the corner of the house. And it had hardly been any consolation for Harold's triumph that Hugh's school was given a holiday, for the freedom was haunted by the thought of Harold claiming his undecipherable consignment of whatever was being consigned to him at Wrottesford railway station.

Harold himself, on the seat of the dog-cart, was so happy that his spectacles danced like sunbeams as he applied his gaze to the butterflies and bicyclists and birds and all the other common objects of the country lanes. He did not have for Pobjoy such a romantic admiration as he had for William, but withal Pobjoy was a more sympathetic companion than William. There was a softness, some would have called it a weakness, in Pobjoy. This led him into such awkward situations as an inability to make up his mind whether he liked Jane or Ethel better, and whether he liked either of them well enough to allow them to hope, as they both did hope, that he would marry them one day. And the same softness and kindness that made him the victim of Jane and Ethel made him the victim

of an informative little boy like Harold, because he was ready to be apparently grateful for and interested in whatever he was told.

Thus, when Harold informed Pobjoy that he now knew the dates of all the principal battles fought by the English and offered to repeat any of them for him, Pobjoy said:

"That's fine, Master Harold."

"Well, ask me any one you like," Harold pressed.

If Pobjoy had not been driving a mettlesome chestnut mare, he would probably have scratched his head, which, it may be worth mentioning, was covered with a thick growth of light orange hair.

"I don't know as I can rightly call to mind any battles, Master Harold. Teacher where I went to school were never much took up wi' battles and suchlike. He were more for what 'un called jography. Drove we poor kids wild he did wi' his lake this and his lake that and lake t'other till I'm darned if we didn't wish he were at the bottom of the nearest horse-pond himself."

"Well, ask me where any lake is, Pobjoy."

"I'm darned if I can call to mind one of them blessed lakes now, Master Harold. I never took much account of 'un when teacher was telling we poor kids about 'un, and I thought the best thing I could do, when I started in to earn a living was to disremember all I larned at school so as it wouldn't stand in the way of me getting on. Let me see, lakes?" He shook his head. "No, I can just call to mind that a lake's full of water, and that's all."

"Well, do try to remember one, Pobjoy," Harold begged. "Anywhere you can ask me. Russia or Ireland or America."

Kind Pobjoy thought hard for a minute or two. Then he shook his light orange head again.

"Darned if I can call to mind one of them."

"Well, ask me which is the biggest lake in the British Isles."

Pobjoy obliged.

"Lough Neagh in Ireland," Harold informed him. "And now ask me which is the biggest lake in Europe."

"In Europe, you say?"

"Yes."

"Well, which is the biggest lake in Europe, then?"

"Lake Ladoga in Russia."

"Ah, now you're being a bit too clever, Master Harold. I said Europe. I didn't say Russia. That's different."

"No, it isn't."

"Russia bean't different from Europe?" Pobjoy exclaimed incredulously. "Well, why be one called Europe and t'other Russia if they be the same?"

"Russia's *in* Europe."

"Since when?"

"Since always."

"Where be Russia then?"

"In the east of Europe."

"Well, where be Europe?"

"That's where we are now," said Harold.

"But I thought as how you said Russia was in Europe."

"So it is."

"And we're in the same place where Russia be?"

"Yes."

"How far away be Russia then?"

"Oh, miles and miles away," Harold told him.

"And we're in the same place as a place miles and miles away? Come, come, Master Harold, you be trying to make I look a bit of a tomfool, I'm afraid."

"No, I'm not, Pobjoy, really I'm not," said Harold earnestly. "But Europe's a continent, don't you see?"

"And what be Russia?"

"Russia's a country."

"The same as we be?"

"Yes."

"And they've got a bigger lake than we have?"

"Much, much, much bigger," Harold exclaimed, with such energy that he nearly fell off the dog-cart as it went round a curve of the road.

"Ah, that's what they say," Pobjoy observed sagely. 'But it don't always do to believe what furriners and suchlike say."

Harold was silent. This point of view about geography had never struck him before. He decided to ask uncle Laurence about it at the next lesson.

Pobjoy's natural sympathy was roused. He felt that perhaps he had been a little unkind to Harold.

"Still, mind you, Master Harold, I'm not saying that this Lake Nowdogo bean't the biggest. All I said was as a Rooshan weren't the same as an Englishman."

"Well, I think Lake Ladoga is the biggest lake in Europe, Pobjoy. But I'll ask my uncle Laurence."

"Ah, now there's a gentleman who knows a lot, I suppose."

"He doesn't know much about butterflies."

"He don't, don't he?"

"When he saw a tiger-moth on the tulip-tree, he called me to come and look at a spotted butterfly. I wonder what caterpillars I'll see at the railway station, Pobjoy?"

"The usual plaguy lot that gets on station-master's currant-bushes. He told me last time I drove in as the plaguy varmints had eaten every blessed leaf from his blacks and was starting in now on his reds."

"I didn't mean the caterpillars of the magpie moth," said Harold. "I've had a postcard from the South-Western Railway to say that there's a case of larva waiting for me at the station."

"Who's been sending you cases of lager? I'd have thought you were a bit young for that kind of a present."

"Not lager, larva."

"What's that?"

"A larva is a caterpillar."

"Well, what do the South-Western want to call it a larva for?"

"Because that's another name for caterpillar."

Pobjoy shook his head.

"It don't sound common sense to me giving two names

to a mucky animal like a caterpillar. But who's beer wild enough to send you a case of caterpillars? That don't sound common sense to me, neither."

"Well, I expect they're for the collection."

"For the collection? Drabbit! If you start puttin caterpillars in the collection I reckon the Reverend Stobar will have something to say about it."

"Not for the collection in church," Harold explained "They're for the collection in the Touchwood Museum I'm the curator of it."

"What be the matter with it then?"

"Nothing."

Pobjoy shook his head again and decided to bring th conversation back to rational lines.

"There's a fine field of hops for you," he observed pointing with his whip over the hedge they were passing

Harold turned his glasses on them, and for the rest o the way to Wrottesford he was kept busy by turning hi glasses on the various objects that he was pointing ou to Pobjoy or that Pobjoy was pointing out to him. Thu pleasantly occupied they reached the railway station.

"I've come for my case, please," Harold announce to the porter.

"Case?" one of them repeated when he had looked a the card. "This isn't a case. This is a canoe."

"A Canadian canoe?" Harold cried.

"It may be an Australian canoe for all I know," sai the porter. "But it's a canoe right enough."

Harold, in a rapture, rushed out of the goods offi to break the news to Pobjoy; his swift approach, h spectacles glittering with joy, and his excited cries mu have made the chestnut mare think he was a motor-ca for she stood up on her hind legs and pawed the air of th station-yard.

"Woa, lass! Woa!" Pobjoy adjured. And when h had calmed the mare he turned on Harold almost crossly

"You ought to know better than to come hollering an hooting at her like that. She might have bolted."

"Pobjoy, canoe, Pobjoy," Harold gulped, his hands lasped in an ecstasy.

"Can I what?"

"My parcel which I thought was caterpillars," Harold abbled. "Oh, do get a boy to hold the mare and come nd look at it."

Soft-hearted Pobjoy could not resist the appeal in that oice. A boy was beckoned up and Pobjoy went into the tation with Harold.

"My dear uncle John must have sent it to me.

Pobjoy gazed at the craft in amazement.

"Why, it's a boat."

"I told you it was."

"You didn't, Master Harold, you said it were a aterpillar."

"Aren't you glad it's come, Pobjoy?" Harold asked s he lovingly stroked the varnish.

"Well, I'm very glad for your sake, Master Harold, ut what are we going to do with it now it has come?"

"Put it on the river of course."

"But how are we going to get it there? We can't put gurt boat like that on the dog-cart. Why didn't the ailway tell you what it were instead of writing a lot f nonsense about caterpillars? Then we could have rought the farm wagon."

Harold looked at the card.

"Well, perhaps they did. Only we couldn't read what ney wrote."

Pobjoy declared the only thing to do was to drive back o Ambles and to notify the wagon at Four Lanes Farm; ut Harold opposed this. Now that the canoe was really ere he could not be persuaded to leave it.

"Can't we get a wagon here?" he asked.

One of the porters suggested that perhaps Mrs. Pringle t the Blue Dragon would send her luggage-van.

"Oh, yes," Harold cried. "I'll go and ask her."

Thus it was that Mrs. Pringle in her snuggery suddenly eheld Harold's glasses gleaming at her just above the

counter. She was wiping glasses of another kind at the time and nearly dropped one of them in her surprise.

"Good gracious alive, if it isn't the Infant Stanley," she exclaimed.

"Good morning, Mrs. Pringle. Please can I have your luggage-van for my Canadian canoe, which is at the station?" Harold asked in one gulp.

"Canoe?" Mrs. Pringle repeated.

"And if I can have it," Harold continued in another long gulp, "can I ride back in it to Ambles and let Pobjoy walk back behind in the dog-cart, because I don't want my Canadian canoe to be scratched, and when I looked at it just now there was a little scratch on it already?"

"Canoe?" Mrs. Pringle repeated.

"The paddles are separate, the porter told me, but I can undo them, and perhaps I can ride in the canoe and pretend I'm paddling all the way back, and then this afternoon we'll put it on the river and I'll take all my dear aunties and uncles for rides in turn, because I'll have practised paddling in your luggage-van, Mrs. Pringle."

"Paddling in my luggage-van?" Mrs. Pringle repeated in dazed tones.

"It wouldn't hurt it, Mrs. Pringle, really it wouldn't," said Harold in what he hoped was a winning voice, though he was sadly aware of such a large lump of excitement in his throat that he feared for the full effect.

"Have a lemon and dash, ducky, and tell me all about this business, because I'm feeling a bit upside-down in my brain-box just at the moment."

"No, thank you, Mrs. Pringle. Mother said I mustn't ever take anything when I'm out if I'm asked except a glass of milk."

"Well, I'll get you a glass of milk," the hostess offered.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Pringle," Harold said. "I think I ought to run back and stand by my canoe because I'm afraid if I don't it will get scratched again. But can I have your luggage-van, please?"

"Look here, what is this canoe exactly?"

"It's a Canadian canoe."

"But how big is it?"

"It isn't frightfully big. Really, Mrs. Pringle," said Harold nervously, for he feared lest she might deny him the transport of the luggage-van. "The porter was only joking when he said they'd left one of the Channel steamers here by mistake for Southampton. He was really, Mrs. Pringle. Can I have your luggage-van, please?"

And thus it was that, in the middle of lunch, just as Hilda was saying for the hundredth time that she wondered what could have happened to Harold, Bertram suddenly cried out:

"A circus procession! A circus procession!" and a moment later corrected himself to utter in a voice in which envy, scorn, amazement and indignation contended: "No, it's not. It's Harold riding in a boat on a wagon and the dog-cart walking behind."

Everybody rose from the table and hurried out to see what it all meant. Beyle was so much excited by the surge of human curiosity that he could only conclude the house was being attacked, and, determined to save the lives of the inmates, he clambered up on the wagon and seized the driver by the seat of his breeches.

Even George had walked out to the front lawn to see what Harold's theatrical arrival meant.

"Hullo," he said, "my canoe's come, has it?"

"It's not your canoe, uncle George," Harold replied, his uvula trembling with nervous apprehension. "It's my canoe."

"Well, I had a letter the other day telling me it was on the way," said George.

"But I had a postcard from the South-Western Railway Company, uncle George," Harold quavered.

"There must have been some mistake," said George.

"There you are, Harold," Bertram and Viola yelled. And without waiting for another word they rushed at Harold even as two Indians on the banks of a tropic stream may rush at a strange canoe. Before anybody

could intervene they had flung him out on to the lawn and were standing upright in the craft, waving each a triumphant paddle.

"They'll scratch it, mother, they'll scratch it," Harold moaned. "It's my Canadian canoe which my dear uncle John sent me. Don't let them scratch it."

Hostilities in the argument over the ownership of the canoe had begun.

CHAPTER XII

THE CANOE

GEORGE did not want the canoe, of course; but egged on by his son and daughter, who wanted it more than anything they had ever wanted in their lives, and by Hugh, who thought that a canoe would be an attraction to the guests of their hotel next summer, he insisted that the craft was his and that the sending of the postcard to Harold had been a mistake.

"Of course it belongs to George," Hugh asserted with some truculence. "Nothing could be clearer than Johnnie's letter. *A Canadian canoe will give him all the adventure he requires. My solicitors have been instructed to put one at his disposal.*"

"Wait a minute, Hugh," Hilda put in. "You left out poor little Harold. *The river with Harold and himself in a Canadian canoe* is what the letter says."

"But the canoe is not to be at Harold's disposal," Hugh argued.

"Johnnie evidently intended it to be put at Harold's disposal just as much as George's," she answered.

"Why doesn't he say so then?"

"He does say so."

"Not to anybody with a glimmering notion of English grammar," Hugh retorted contemptuously.

"Then why was the card sent to Harold?"

"A mistake."

"Why should the railway company make such a silly mistake?" Hilda persisted.

"Ah, but wait a bit, Hilda," George put in. "Don't forget that these people Bewick and Jones, who built the canoe, evidently thought they were building it for me. In fact they distinctly wrote and told me so."

"You haven't shown Hilda this letter yet, George," James reminded him, for James was remembering that the family pictures and the family silver had been taken away from him by John and were now being held in trust for Bertram on his coming of age. He was inclined to side with Harold over the canoe.

"Well, I don't know where it is now," said George. "I'm not a walking waste-paper basket. All I know is that about a week ago I had a letter from these people at Hampton Court to say that a canoe was being sent down here for me. And, as it's extremely unlikely that another canoe is going to arrive, this must be mine."

"In justice to Harold, however," Hilda said, "you must admit that the card from the railway company was equally clear."

"It wasn't at all clear," Hugh contradicted. "Not one of you could read it."

"Everybody could read Harold's name on the address," Hilda snapped.

Laurence now entered the argument like a Rhadamanthus.

"Would not the best procedure in the circumstances be to write and ask John's solicitors to explain the ambiguous manner in which the canoe was dispatched?"

"Bravo, Lorenzo," Hugh laughed. "I thought you were going to emulate Solomon at first and suggest cutting it in half."

"Come, come, Hugh, I am not quite such a land-lubber as that," said Laurence. "Half a canoe would indeed be an unseaworthy craft."

"So would half a baby if it comes to that."

So James as the eldest, the holder of the original letter and presumably a neutral, was asked to write to Messrs. White, Howard, Hunter, Howard and Kemp. Messrs.

White, Howard, Hunter, Howard and Kemp, on being apprised of the mistake, did what any other old-established and reputable firm of solicitors would have done: they made the most of it. A long letter was written to James, for which they charged John in his bill of costs, and by the time James had read that letter aloud three times the ownership of the canoe was considerably more doubtful than before.

Meanwhile, the canoe itself had been put into the stable pending the decision between the rival claimants, for neither Hilda nor George, who by this time had been worked up into a fine John Bull obstinacy, would consent to its being launched.

Harold's great fear was lest the canoe should be scratched, and to prevent this he stood on guard outside the stable-door, warning people to be careful with their nails. It would have given Bertram and Viola much pleasure to scratch the canoe, if they could have been sure that it really was Harold's; as it might be their father's and so indirectly their own, they scratched Harold instead.

A second letter from the solicitors said that, inasmuch as Mr. John Touchwood was travelling in Canada and unlikely to be back in England until the beginning of September, it was impossible for them to ascertain from him whether he intended the canoe to be at the disposal of Mr. Harold Curtis and Mr. George Touchwood jointly or severally. In the circumstances perhaps the claimants would agree to hold the matter in abeyance until they could communicate with Mr. John Touchwood. James, who had no riverine ambitions, thought the best solution would be to lock the canoe up in the stable until the matter was settled.

"After all, a canoe doesn't eat anything," he pointed out.

George was no more anxious to explore the river than his eldest brother was; but Hilda's attitude had touched his pride, and he went so far as to say that he was damned if he was going to keep his canoe locked up in a stable

merely because John's solicitors had made asses of themselves. Hilda dreaded the way Harold was going to pester her unless the canoe were soon launched. So she, too, favoured its removal from the stables. Hugh declared he had never heard of anything more idiotic in his life than keeping a canoe in a stable. Laurence, however, was inclined to side with James. He saw nothing idiotic in keeping a canoe in a stable. It was, after all, the existence that a lifeboat led for most of the year.

"And what nobler example than a lifeboat is imaginable?" he asked with bell-voiced rhetoric.

"But if we don't put it in the river now," Harold protested, "the summer will be quite gone."

"Yes, it will," Bertram agreed.

Harold's glasses shimmered with astonishment, for his cousin had never agreed with him before. However, in spite of both the rival owners being anxious to put the canoe into action, they could not bring themselves to agree to a joint launch, and so the canoe remained in the stable.

Eleanor arrived from town, and was bitterly voluble on the subject of Hilda's deliberate attempt to keep Bertram and Viola from enjoying what they had a right to enjoy. She pointed out that the family pictures were hanging on the walls and that the family silver was being used at meals. Yet in John's letter he had made a special point of their being kept in trust for Bertram until he came of age. She went so far as to urge George to veto the use of the fish knives and forks until Hilda was more reasonable over the canoe. This revived old grievances in the breast of James, who began to brood again over his loss, and in order to annoy Eleanor now declared that he was convinced John intended the canoe for Harold. In this opinion Beatrice supported him noisily.

"Oh, dear," Edith said to her husband, "I really am very glad that dear little Frida is not mixed up in this most unpleasant argument, for there's one thing

certain, whoever the canoe belongs to, Frida shall never go in it. I went and looked at it for quite a long while this morning, and it doesn't look to me at all a safe kind of boat."

"A canoe is perfectly safe, my dear, unless one should haply fidget in it," Laurence observed, with a slight edge to his usually smooth tones, for he was making some calculations with the Pythagorean numbers and his wife had just dusted the india-rubber off his desk in her agitation.

"I'm so sorry, dear," she said. "I'm afraid I'm disturbing you with my dusting."

"No, no," he murmured. "I recognize that these domestic energies are necessary. But perhaps you could dust the other side of my study for a few minutes. I was never a ready hand at figures, and these Pythagorean calculations are useless unless meticulously accurate."

"I'm sorry, dear," said his wife, shaking out her duster nervously, and in doing so shaking a certain amount of dust over her husband's distinguished-looking hair. "Oh, dear, Laurence, I'm afraid a few specks of dust have dropped on to you."

"Never mind, never mind, I'll attend to that presently," said Laurence. "Do, my dear, let me beg of you not to make me add these figures up for the fourth time."

That afternoon while Bertram was hanging disconsolately about the stable yard and wishing that God would take it into His head to get angry with the world again and send another flood so that there could no longer be an excuse for not launching the canoe immediately, he observed William winking at him. He realized that William wished to say something to him and drew near.

"When I takes the next barrer of manure along to the wall-garden, come on after me because I've summat to say," William muttered in a hoarse mysterious voice.

So Bertram, hoping that perhaps William had committed a murder and wished to confess where he had buried the corpse, which would relieve a little the tedium of waiting

for the launch of the canoe, followed the barrow to a remote corner of the kitchen-garden.

When William had emptied out the manure, he went and peered cautiously between two rows of peas and then between the stakes of the scarlet-runners.

"I thought as that Harold might have been hiding there," he explained, "and I didn't want for him to hear what I were going to say to 'ee."

It is perhaps difficult to feel sentimental over Harold, and yet there is pathos in the thought of his devotion to William thus repaid. To be referred to by his hero with a demonstrative pronoun instead of a title of courtesy and looked for among the pea-sticks like an intrusive sparrow might have blurred Harold's glasses with tears of mortification.

"Harold's up in his room, cleaning out his aquarium," Bertram assured William.

"Yes," said William, shaking his head knowingly "but he's so sly and cunning with they goggles of his you don't know where he'll be nosing arter anybody the next moment. Yesterday morning I went to weed the cucumbers for Mr. Huggins, and I'm beggared if I didn't find 'un inside the frame, and when I asked 'un what he were doing he told me he were looking for cuckoos, and it bean't natural to go looking for cuckoos in a cucumber frame."

"I expect he was looking for cocoons really," Bertram suggested.

"What be they then?"

"Why, those beastly things caterpillars get into and grow wings and then come out as butterflies."

"Well, that peeping Harold nearly come out of that frame with wings, such a start he give me when he said 'Hullo, William,' and me thinking of nought but Lamma Fair in Galton that as near as a touch I hit 'un on the head with the hoe."

"What did you want to say to me, William?" Bertram asked.

"Why, it's about that canoe, as you call it," William said. "If you can get her down on the river I've found a proper place for you to keep it hid from that Harold. It's been riling of me fit to bust, seeing 'un for ever on the jig round the stable-door and watching to see as nobody scratches his darned canoe."

"But it isn't his," Bertram insisted. "It's father's. Uncle John gave it to him for his health, and he said we could use it."

"Well, Harold thinks it's his'n," William declared. 'And he's worse nor a Radical over that boat. I just run my hand along the side to feel it and he sprung at me like a bitch wi' a litter of pups. 'Your hands is dirty, William,' he sung out. 'Be careful, or it'll come off on my canoe.' And with that I'm beggared if he didn't out wi' his nose-rag and wipe it over where I'd just run my hand along."

"And it isn't his canoe," Bertram averred passionately. 'It isn't. It's ours. Uncle Hugh says it is."

"Well, I reckon Mr. Hugh might help you to put her in this place I've found for her. It's an ancient tottery old hut about half a mile this side of Hanger Bridge, and Farmer Willett says you can have the key and a pleasure. So what I reckoned you could do was get out of bed to-night, and if Mr. Hugh will lend a hand we'll drag the boat across the field and down through the water-meadows, and then take her round by the river to this here hut. Then, whenever you wanted, you could go out in her. And I wouldn't mind coming out along with 'ee sometimes, Master Bertram. It's been on my mind for a year now to run away and go to sea. But I'd like to know what it feels like in a boat afore I leave my mother."

"You can come out with us whenever you like, William," Bertram promised enthusiastically. "I say, thanks most awfully for finding this spiffing place for the canoe. But I say, do you think uncle Hugh and Viola and you and I will be able to lug it down to the river?"

"I reckon we could. I'd ask Pobjoy to give a hand. But Pobjoy's turned so blooming soft over those two maids

that he's took to reading tracks in his spare time now. The trouble is he don't like to hurt either by saying 'yes' to t'other. It's preying on him, poor chap. He told me yesterday he'd a mind to join the Salvation Army, and be off wi' both maids. He says he would if he were sure they'd give 'un the big drum to bang. He's wonderful took wi' the notion of banging the big drum, Pobjoy is; but he reckons as they'll only give 'un the hymn-books to hand round, and that don't take his eye like the drum. Poor old Pobjoy, he's fair frizz up wi' they two maids. I suppose you never done no sweetheartin' yet, Master Bertram?"

"Good lummy, rather not!"

"No more haven't I," William said pensively. "But I reckon we'll both of us come to it. It seems as if it had to be, the way a baby comes to teething. Still, I be going to keep my liberty so long as ever I can. That's a sure thing. I've seen too many turn soft wi' this love, as they call it, the way butter'll turn in the sun. I had a friend about a twelve-month older nor me. Jim Thick his name were. He were all right on the Monday. On Tuesday he seed a maid hanging up clouts on Braxted Green. On Wednesday he were like a fowl wi' the pip. On Thursday he axed me would I care to walk up with 'un to Braxted. There was the maid—Katie Batt here name were—and she leaning over the gate of her father's cottage. And when I turned round to pass some joking remark wi' Jim, my gosh, his face had gone like a mangel in frost. And wi' that I walked on whistling and left 'un to it, poor soul."

William sighed deeply and shouldered his fork.

"Well, Master Bertram, if you can get Mr. Hugh to lend us a hand I reckon we'll have that roistering Harold's canoe on the river to-night and leave Pobjoy to his tracks."

Hugh was delighted by the idea of helping over the canoe when the project was put before him. As for Bertram, when the time came to go to bed that night the thought of what was before him was filling him with such

erene joy that his radiant countenance impressed even he assembled family as he made his round of good-nights.

"Do you know, really, Eleanor dear," Edith said, 'Bertram sometimes has an almost angelic expression. I thought he looked quite beautiful when he kissed me good-night."

Bertram and Viola were naturally both confident that hey would be able to remain awake until the rest of the family were fast asleep, and they proposed to assume the esponsibility of waking their uncle Hugh. He, however, vas doubtful of relying on their vigilance. So in the end William, who slept in a room over the stables remote from nybody, was told to set his alarm for two o'clock, and when he judged all was still to come and throw gravel gainst Bertram's window. Bertram was then to wake with the utmost caution his uncle and his sister. It all ounded a most simple operation, the way Hugh sketched t out beforehand. Actually the only part of it that went ight was William's alarum-clock, and even that over-tepped the mark, because although punctually at two it egan to shrill away in William's ear from the table beside is bed, it proceeded at the same time, owing to William's aving omitted to see that his table stood level, to vibrate cross it, so that just as William woke up it vibrated off ltogether and fell with a crash on the floor.

William had gone to bed in an excited frame of mind, n which an extra large helping of cheese at supper had vorked as remorselessly as Iago upon the mind of Othello. Dream had succeeded dream, culminating with a dreadful ffair in which William was riding down an almost per-endicular hill on a bicycle, the handle-bar of which, ust as the pace was making his heart thud and his breath hoke, turned into a large eel with red eyes. This trans-ormation made the bicycle difficult to steer, particularly when soon after the handle-bar turned into an eel with ed eyes, the wheels lost their rotundity and became quare. The result of this was that, while the bicycle ontinued to descend the hill at an ever increasing speed,

it now did so in a series of sickening leaps. The difficulty of keeping his seat was added to by having to ring a large and heavy hand-bell to warn people that he was coming. To his horror, and just as he realized that unless he could regain control of the bicycle he must plunge down into a bottomless abyss, the eel with which he was steering began to grow larger and larger and finally to start coiling itself round and round poor William. He tried to shriek, but he could do nothing except ring his hand-bell until at last he and the bell and the eel went over the edge of the . . . bed just as the alarum-clock crashed on the floor. Not only did William go over the edge of the bed, he went over it with all the bedclothes on top of him, so that another minute of agony passed before he collected his senses sufficiently to disentangle himself from the blankets and sheets in which he was completely wound up.

William's nightmare has been related at some length in justice to William himself, because it will explain why he emerged from his bedroom so much shaken in mind and body that he mistook Bertram's window. Indeed, when he crossed the lawn in the warm July moonlight he was not in a fit condition to carry through the delicate operation of waking a person by throwing gravel at his window. The memory of that red-eyed eel was still with him, and he was still shaking at the thought of that last ghastly plunge over the edge of the abyss. He was obsessed with a desire to wake Bertram as quickly as possible in order to have a glimpse of a human face again and so banish the vision of that red-eyed eel. Consequently, when he was standing as he thought beneath Bertram's window, in his nervousness he flung a good deal more gravel than was prudent. Nor was that his only mistake, for in his agitation of spirit he missed the pane and hurled the lot over the top of it into the room.

Thus it was that Laurence, who owing to the warmth of the night had opened his window wide and drawn the curtains, woke up with a start accompanied by a smarting sensation all over his face. Now Laurence had been

sleeping in Frida's room these weeks in order to enjoy a supernatural experience, and with the promptitude of a Hamlet or a Quixote he sat up in bed and challenged his ghostly visitor to say who and what he was. A tattoo upon the window-pane was the response, followed almost immediately by a loud tap on Laurence's door, which out of scientific honesty he always kept locked so that should a ghost appear to him he would be able to contradict any suggestion of its being a terrestrial creature. Laurence had inscribed with a diamond-pencil a pentagram upon the window-pane, the efficacy of which for preventing evil phantoms from entering and good phantoms from leaving it is a commonplace of magic. He had also with the same object nailed to the door his lambskin with the pentagram painted upon it in vermilion. The warmth of the July night, however, had led him to open his window so wide that he was inclined to think that some evil phantom had evaded the potent sign. That would explain the way his face was smarting. He sat still in bed, trying to remember what procedure the best magicians recommended to deal with such a situation, and gradually, as the moonlight began to endow the furniture with a semblance of uncanny life, a distinct tendency to gooseflesh manifested itself all over Laurence's body.

The first rap on the door was succeeded by three louder raps.

"Who are you?" Laurence demanded. "Speak, spirit."

Instead of the cannonade of raps which he had expected to follow this question, the voice of James was heard outside asking him to come and open the door.

Laurence got out of bed, and on unlocking the door saw James in the passage outside, holding in one hand a candle, with the other Beyle on a lead.

"Why, what is the matter, James?"

"Burglars," said his brother-in-law. "I hadn't gone to sleep, and suddenly I heard stealthy footsteps on the gravel path beside the lawn. Beyle heard them too, and

rushed growling to the window. I followed him and, looking out, saw a figure crouching against the wall of the house just under your bedroom window."

"Well, James, I'm glad you did," said Laurence. "You will be a useful witness. And now list to my tale. It is passing strange."

"I'll listen to your tale afterwards. What we want to do now is to wake up Hugh and George, and then wake up William and send him across to wake Huggins and Pobjoy."

"Yes, yes," said Laurence. "Excellent measures, my dear James, if it really were a burglar; but this was not a burglar."

"I tell you I saw the great hulking brute."

"No, James, what you saw was an evil spirit."

"Bunkum," the other expostulated. "Do you think I can't tell the difference between a burglar and an evil spirit?"

Laurence held up a hand to allay his brother-in-law's impatience.

"If you will list to my tale, James, you will soon be convinced. I was woken up suddenly by a sharp pain all over my face. The phenomenon of malicious spirit pinching the sage is, of course, familiar to all students of the history of occultism. I sat up in bed and demanded sternly who the spirit was. I was immediately answered by a tremendous rattling and banging on my window, and apparently a loud rap on my door, which—here I admit I was too hasty—I also attributed to an agency not human."

"Well, you've apparently made the same mistake about the pinching. Look at your bed," said James. "It is covered with gravel. Somebody has been throwing gravel at your window."

"Hardly the kind of thing a burglar would do, James. I fear your hulking brute if not a foul spirit must have been our nephew Bertram," said Laurence somewhat acidly.

"Well, we can soon prove that" said James. "Isn't his room next to yours?"

Laurence went along the passage and cautiously peeped nto Bertram's room. He came back, shaking his head.

"I have misjudged him. The boy is in bed fast asleep."

"Could it be Harold?" James asked.

"I scarcely think so. It is not like Harold to slink ound the house throwing gravel into people's rooms. would sooner suspect Viola, though perhaps Viola hardly uggests your description of a hulking brute, James," his rother-in-law added with gentle sarcasm.

The room finally allotted to Viola when she declined o share a room with Frida was what would have been he dressing-room of her parents, and by an unfortunate rror of judgment Laurence, in his investigation of the nystery, opened the door of the room in which George and Eleanor were asleep. Now, whether Beyle remembered is attack on this room when the pig was in it, or whether he noise of George's snores fired his pluck to attack the nknown monster which was imperilling the safety of Ambles, was and always will be uncertain. Whatever Beyle's inspiration, his action was swift. He leapt forward nto George's and Eleanor's room with a wild bark so uddenly that James let the lead slip out of his hand and n the shock of the occurrence closed the door with a bang nd hurried back along the corridor, followed by Laurence, quite forgetting that in the shock of Beyle's onset he had hut him in George's and Eleanor's room.

"Confound that dog," he exclaimed, when he and Laurence were back in the latter's room. "I thought he was following us. How on earth shall I explain to George what happened?"

"Oh, you'll have to tell him we were looking for burglars," said Laurence with a superior smile. "You'll have to say you thought the great hulking brute was hiding under George's bed."

Laurence was certainly getting his own back over the evil spirit.

"Yes, but it sounds such an idiotic thing to go and et a dog into a bedroom at nearly half-past two in the

morning and then shut it in and run away. Listen, can you hear anything ? "

" I fancied I heard someone screaming," said Laurence. " The dog wouldn't be likely to tear George and Eleanor to pieces, would he ? "

" Oh, no, he won't attack them as soon as he sees who they are," said James ; and yet there was in his tone a lack of that jaunty confidence with which he had disposed of Laurence's evil spirit. " I'll tell you what, I think I'll go and ask Beatrice to run along and let him out if George and Eleanor haven't managed to turn him out themselves."

" Meanwhile, we have not yet ascertained whether your hulking burglar was nephew Harold," said Laurence.

" I'm not going round opening any more doors," James snapped. " And it was your fault that Beyle got into George and Eleanor's room. You opened the wrong door. Hark ! I believe I did hear a scream then. But I'm sure Beyle wouldn't go for anybody he recognized. The only thing is he may not recognize Eleanor without her make-up. I think I'll go and ask Beatrice to investigate."

" Shut old Bill Bailey in George and Eleanor's room ? " his wife repeated in astonishment when James made his request. " But whatever for ? "

" I can't explain now," said James irritably. " It was that ass Laurence's fault. I'll tell you all about it later. The thing you must do is to get Beyle out of it as tactfully as possible. He's probably refusing to allow either of them to get out of bed and let him out themselves. You know what he's like when he gets excited."

" But if you or I go and let him out," Beatrice objected, " they'll be sure to think we put him in for a trick. You know how funny Eleanor is with me sometimes."

" Nonsense," her husband said, " you simply must go along and get him out somehow. We can say we let him out for a run and he must have found their door open and walked in."

However, when Beatrice at the instance of her husband went along the corridor, the nearer she got to George's and

Eleanor's room, the less she liked the idea of facing either of them with the tale she had to tell. It occurred to her, as she was passing the door of Hilda's room, to go in and, after warning her that she thought there was something the matter in George's and Eleanor's room, ask her to come along and see what it was.

"Something the matter in George and Eleanor's room?" exclaimed Hilda, waking from deep sleep.

"Yes, James thought he heard Eleanor screamin' out."

"You don't think George is knocking her about?"

"No, no, of course not, Hilda."

Hilda was into her dressing-gown so quickly that perhaps in her heart she rather hoped that George was knocking Eleanor about, because she was so furious with both of them over the canoe and the way they had behaved about the fish-knives that she would not have minded unveiling a domestic scandal.

Beatrice let her sister-in-law go on ahead, and when Hilda reached the door of George's and Eleanor's room she certainly could distinguish half-stifled cries. Could George be murdering Eleanor? In justice to Hilda let it quickly be said that she did not hope that. In fact the very thought of it made her heart flutter. She opened the door and asked in a quavery voice if anything was the matter; but she shut the door a second later with a resounding slam and uttered a loud shriek herself, for from the darkness of the curtained room Beyle had flung himself against the door with a vicious growl.

"There's some animal in there," she called faintly to Beatrice.

There was nothing for it now, but to open the door and call Beyle out, Beatrice decided. And out he came, wagging his extravagantly kinked tail and smiling with satisfaction at having kept George and Eleanor underneath the bedclothes for five minutes.

"But it's Beyle!" Hilda exclaimed. "How did he get in there?"

"Don't ask me," said Beatrice. "James let him out

for a run, and I suppose he found the door of George and Eleanor's room open and probably he jumped up on the bed and licked George's face or somethin', and perhaps Eleanor screeched. They're both ridiculous about the poor old dog."

"Aren't you going in to explain what happened?" Hilda asked.

"No, no," said Beatrice. "I think it'll be better to explain in the mornin'. They'll have got over their fright by then."

They had reached the door of Laurence's room, and on going past they were stopped by Laurence himself coming out to ask if they had found the burglar.

"The burglar?" Hilda echoed in horror.

"Yes, yes. Our good James looked out and saw a great hulking brute lurking beneath my window. I myself have no doubt whatever but that it was an evil spirit. James, however, prefers to think it is a burglar."

"A burglar?" repeated Hilda. "Oh, I must go at once and see if Harold is all right."

Harold, however, spared his mother the trouble of ascending the stairs. He had slept with his door ajar ever since he had been frightened by Maria Marten's ghost and had just been wakened in the same way as Laurence, except that the gravel only rattled against his window instead of falling in a shower on his face.

It was William's second blunder. After he had made the mistake over Bertram's room, poor William had been alarmed by the movements of lights in various rooms and had crept back into the stable-yard. Here, after waiting for a quarter of an hour or so without hearing any more signs of disturbance, he had decided to try to wake Hugh whose window looked out on the yard, in the same way as he had intended to wake Bertram. He did not succeed in hitting Hugh's window, but he managed instead to get a good handful of gravel against Harold's. Realizing by the light in Harold's room that he had wakened the wrong person for the second time that night, William decided

to give up and hurried back toward his own room above the stable, the door of the staircase up to which he reached just as Harold reached the window. Now the same staircase that led to William's room led to the Touchwood Museum, and Harold, for whose eyes the moonlight played the same trick with William's form as it had played for James, supposed that a burglar was about to break into the museum of which he was the curator. The thought of his dear father's humming-birds being hastily shovelled into the bag of a burglar, together with the shell Huggins had presented, his own butterflies and moths and birds' eggs and what was left of his uncle James's collection of dragon-flies, gave Harold the necessary courage to rush out of his room and go pounding down the stairs to the floor below, shouting as he ran :

" Burglars ! Burglars ! The burglars are breaking into my museum ! "

This time he had not forgotten to put on his glasses. Indeed, it was through his glasses he had beheld the burglar. His progress through the house shouting, " Burglars ! burglars ! " was like a fire-engine's through a quiet nocturnal street. Jane and Ethel heard the cry and clung, shivering, to one another in a paroxysm of terror. Hugh heard it and hastily got into a pair of trousers. Frida heard it and made even more noise than Harold in her mother's ear, who heard it and clutched her daughter to her breast. Mrs. Smith heard it and dressed to meet her doom. Viola, who had slept through the stifled cries of her parents beneath the bedclothes when Beyle was galumphing round their room, heard it and danced out in her nightgown, clapping her hands with pleasurable excitement. Eleanor heard it and began to unwind her curling-pins with trembling fingers. George heard it and said he did not intend to be deterred by any burglar from having it out with James in the morning. The only person in the house who did not hear it was Bertram. He had managed to keep awake till about half-past one, had then fallen into a sleep even more profound than usual, and

did not wake until next morning. Nor was it any consolation for him to know that the burglar must have been William. The others had gathered in the dining-room, eaten cakes there, drunk milk, and talked over the adventure until the dawn was rosy. His own sister had forgotten him. He had been left to sleep through it. It was perhaps the greatest blow life had dealt him hitherto, and instead of waking with the precious thought that the canoe was safely hidden out of Harold's reach, he had woken to find Harold and Beyle twin heroes, for nobody doubted but that Beyle had rushed into George's and Eleanor's room in a vain attempt to seize the burglars.

"Why didn't you wake me?" he demanded of Viola.

"Oh, Bertram, I'm most terribly sorry. I am really. But I was so excited that I forgot."

"It makes me feel that I don't ever want to go to sleep again," Bertram groaned in his despair.

CHAPTER XIII

HIGGINBOTHAM

THE dispute about the ownership of the canoe was unable to survive the advent of the summer holidays. When finally a letter came from the solicitors to say that John would be arriving at Southampton by the White Star liner *Bombastic* early in September, and that they were of the opinion nothing could be settled about the ownership of the canoe until he had been consulted, the protests of the released scholars became too persistent to be disregarded. It was finally decided that the canoe should be commanded on alternate days by Harold and Bertram acting as deputy for his father. Every time that Bertram hoisted his flag he accused Harold of having committed various enormities with the canoe during his period of command. Once Harold tried the same tactics.

"Bertram," he began, "you made a huge scratch on the . . ."

A splash interrupted Harold's first and only attempt at a court-martial, for the impeached commander pushed him into the river to quench the argument, and he had no sooner clambered out on to the bank than Beyle jumped up at him and knocked him in again.

Still, in spite of an occasional minor fuss, Harold revelled in the canoe, and seldom did he return from one of his expeditions without adding a specimen either to the population of his aquarium or to the shelves of the Touchwood Museum. Bertram and Viola enjoyed the canoe, too, but more for the historical figures it enabled them to

fancy themselves than for the swift motion down-stream the contests with shallows, the discovery of new flower and butterflies, and the observation of wild life on one o the smallest of English rivers. The Argonauts, th Odyssey, Vikings with the Raven banner, Normans landin on the coast of Sussex, Christopher Columbus discoverin America, the Spanish Armada, the Battle of Trafalgar— these were but a few of the scenes and characters the enacted. And Harold, for the sake of being allowed t pursue unmolested his solitary investigation of the flor and fauna of small rivers, was always willing to take th less popular rôles in these evocations of the past. Thu he was the dragon that guarded the Golden Fleece, an such was his devotion to duty that he was pierced by a tic when guarding the skin of a dead sheep Bertram ha borrowed from Farmer Willet and nailed to a willow tree round the foot of which Harold had to coil himself. H was his own namesake fighting at Hastings where, thoug he did not receive the arrow in his eye, he was struck i many other parts of the body by the Norman shafts. H had a rough time as a Spaniard, and even at the Batt of Trafalgar, when he was to have the pleasure of shootin Lord Nelson with an unripe elderberry from his air-gun, h had the misfortune to hit Lord Nelson on the cheek an sting him up to such an extent that the hero instea of dying jumped from the deck of the *Victory* right u into the rigging of the *Redoubtable* and knocked the Frenc sharpshooter headlong from the crosstrees, the branch a willow which overhung the stream.

Frida, who at first had played in several of these hi torical scenes, was forbidden to play in any more of the after the Siren episode in the Odyssey. It fell out th way. Viola and Frida were to be the Sirens. Bertram a Ulysses was to be paddled by Harold as his crew past th small green ait which represented the isle of the Siren The first trouble was over putting the wax in Harold's ea to prevent his being lured ashore by the song the Siren sang.

"I'm not going to have wax in my ears," Harold declared when he saw Bertram hacking away with his Norwegian knife at a lump of beeswax he had secured from Jane.

"It won't hurt, you coward," Bertram promised.

"It will hurt."

"It didn't hurt the crew of Ulysses."

"I don't care. It'll hurt *me*," Harold insisted. "But I don't mind having cotton-wool in if you like."

"Cotton-wool!" Bertram jeered. "You don't suppose they had cotton-wool in ancient Greece, do you?"

"We can pretend it's wax," Harold urged. "We always have to pretend a lot in our games."

"Games!" Bertram scoffed, for ever since the production of *The Murder in the Red Barn*, he had shown the family tendency to take himself seriously as a playwright. And here it may be mentioned that this very week at the end of July, Eleanor, hearing of a theatre that badly needed a play to contend with the blazing summer weather, had dashed up to town with the script of James's melodrama on the chance of getting it produced as the last desperate throw of some manager. Of that more presently.

"Games!" Bertram scoffed. "This isn't a game. It's a pageant."

"Well, I'm not going to have any of that beeswax in my ears," Harold declared. "Suppose I couldn't ever get it out again?"

"But Ulysses put wax in the ears of his crew, and they got it out all right."

"Where does it say they did in Church's *Story of the Odyssey?*" Harold asked.

Bertram referred to his textbook.

"Ulysses says, 'When we had passed by the island, they took the wax from their ears and loosed my bonds.' Come on, Harold, do be decent, and let me put it in. You'll spoil the whole show if you don't."

"But in the book," said Harold, whose glasses were

glinting over his cousin's shoulder, it says that 'Ulysse cleft a great round of wax with his sword and melted i in the sun.' That isn't a great round of wax, and you'r hacking at it with your Norwegian knife. If you ca pretend your knife is a sword, I can pretend my cotton wool is wax."

"But where is your putrid cotton-wool?"

Harold at once produced from his pocket one of th fibre pill-boxes in which he always carried the specimer he captured on those happy days when the canoe wa at his disposal. Each of these was well primed wit cotton-wool.

In the end a compromise was reached, and Harol agreed to have his ears plastered with yellow clay instea of beeswax.

The next anxiety of Bertram as pageant master wa that the Sirens should be as naked as a picture of ther he had once seen. And now the scruples of Frida looke like spoiling the realism for which he craved.

"No, Bertram, I won't undress," she declared firmly

"Good lummy!" he groaned. "Why not? It's a hot as hell this afternoon. You won't catch cold."

"I'm not going to undress," she repeated. "It rude."

"But, my dear ass, it's not rude to undress in ancier Greek mythology. V's going to undress, aren't you, V?"

"No, you're not to, Viola," Frida intervened primly "I won't play this game any more, if you do. I onl like to play nice games."

"It's not a game, I keep telling you," Bertram insiste "It's a pageant. If it was a game, you wouldn't have t undress; you could pretend you had nothing on. Bu you can't pretend in a pageant."

In the end another compromise was effected. C condition that Viola retained her chemise Frida agree to take off her own frock.

"And your shoes and stockings," Bertram pressed.

"But a snake might bite me," she objected.

"There are no snakes on that little island in the middle f the river. Now then, V, have you learnt the words of he Sirens' song?"

"*Hither, Ulysses, great Achaian name,*
Turn thy swift keel, and listen to our lay;
Since never pilgrim near these regions came,
In black ship on the azure fields astray,
But heard our sweet voice ere he sailed away,"

he recited from the text.

"Spiffing," he approved, with a grateful look at his ister for the care with which she had studied the Sirens' ong.

The two blood-thirsty nymphs, with a large parcel of ones which Bertram had been collecting arduously for ome time, were put ashore on the ait. The remains of he mariners they had devoured were scattered about the reen strand. The ears of Harold the crew were stopped ith clay. Bertram was bound with cord to a hop-pole. he perilous voyage began. And it was really thrilling o see the way Ulysses enchanted by the singing of the irens tried to loose his bonds, and the dogged way in hich the crew, deaf to his entreaties to put him ashore, nd blind (their glasses having been removed as anti-ythological) to the swaying form of Parthenope and the ore puritanical graces of Leucosia, paddled past the fatal let.

A few minutes later when the Sirens had been taken ff to the mainland, Frida said:

"Bertram, you naughty boy, where have you hidden y frock?"

"I haven't touched your frock."

"But you must have."

"And you've taken my knicks, you cheat," his sister dded. "I won't undress again, if you cheat like that."

"I've not taken your rotten knickers," repeated Bertram dignantly.

"Well, they've gone."

"And so's my frock," said Frida plaintively.

"Harold, you caddish worm," Viola accused, "you've taken our things."

Harold blinked nervously through his glasses. Although he could see that his female cousins were angry, he had not yet had time to extract the clay from his ears and so could not hear the accusation. Bertram came to the rescue of his deaf crew, for he had no fault to find with the way it had rowed him safely past the fatal isle of the Sirens.

"Keep your hair on, young V. Harold hasn't touched your beastly clothes. Perhaps it was a tramp."

"But a tramp wouldn't want my knickers," Viola pointed out.

"I shouldn't think anybody would want your beastly knickers," Bertram agreed. "They must have fallen into the river."

"Oh, yes, very clever, you cunning Isaac," his sister jeered. "When you threw them in yourself."

"I didn't, I tell you," he shouted.

Frida was beginning to whimper softly. She was not of the stuff of which Lady Godivas are made, and she was dismayed by the prospect of walking back frockless to the house.

At this moment, when down by the riverside mariners and Sirens were becoming quarrelsome, Beyle was dragging the upper part of a light blue linen frock and half of one leg of a pair of navy blue serge knickers across the sweeping lawns of Ambles.

"What," Edith was saying, where beneath the shade of the big tulip-tree she and Hilda and Beatrice were seated round a table on which the cloth was already laid for tea, "what is Beyle growling over on the croquet lawn?"

Beatrice whistled, and called to him.

"Bring it here, Bill, old man. Good dog, bring it to muzzer."

Beyle, who had had a brief argument with one of the roquet-hoops over the right to detain the upper part of ne light blue linen frock, came galumphing over with it o the tree, surrendering to the croquet-hoop the half- g of knickers.

Edith, on seeing the ominous fragment, put a hand to er heart and muttered faintly :

" Little Frida has been drowned."

" Don't be foolish, Edith," said Hilda in angry fright, or she was asking herself the same dreadful question about ne fate of Harold. Even Beatrice, who thought both er sisters-in-law unnecessarily fussy about their children, hitened.

Thus it was that Ulysses and his crew, wrangling with ne two Sirens on their way up through the meadows fter putting their canoe in Farmer Willet's hut, were iet by an agitated party of relations, who, as soon as they aw they were not drowned, began to rate them for their noughtless behaviour.

" Frida, I did hope for a better example from you," aid her mother reproachfully. " Hold my parasol in ront of you, dear. The men may see you as you go by. h dear, I'm really horrified to think you could do such thing."

" Well, they can't see I haven't got any knicks on," aid Viola, " that's one good job."

" Another word, Viola," said her aunt Hilda, " and you ill go immediately to bed."

" I don't care if I do, because I'm most frightfully hot, ven without my knicks."

" Silence, Viola," her aunt commanded, " you are tterly brazen. And what have you been doing to our ears, Harold ? " she exclaimed, turning on her son, ot without irritation.

" I'm going to wash them before tea," he said.

" I hope so, indeed, my boy," his uncle Laurence put , with a shudder of disgust.

As Laurence spoke, the bones of the mariners devoured

by the Sirens fell out of the pillow-case which Bertram wa carrying, and lay scattered on the grass.

"So that's where the bones have been going to," Hild exclaimed. "Mrs. Smith has been complaining to m for the last ten days that she has not been able to kee a single bone in the kitchen. You really are the mos mischievous boy in the world, I believe."

"Oh, well," said Bertram wearily, for the bones ha been a heavy burden to lug up from the river, the su was hot, and those agitated relations were spoiling hi contented retrospect of the scene from the Odyssey latel performed, "we had to have them for the Sirens. only brought them back for Beyle, because some of ther belong to him really."

James slapped his leg.

"By gad, Beatrice, that dog's a marvel. So that why he carried off the girls' clothes. *He* knew they' taken his bones and he meant to pay them out for it."

Whether so much method could be attributed to th bulldog's apparent madness could obviously never b proved. However, he now relieved Bertram of the weigh of the biggest bone by arriving at this moment an springing upon it with a growl of gratification. It wa one of the largest marrow bones ever seen; but he carrie it all the way back to the house without letting it sli from his jaws once, carried it proudly, his tail waggin his haunches quivering.

And this was why Frida took no further part in th serial re-enactment of the Odyssey. Her mother coul not get out of her head the first shock of seeing Bey disentangling that fragment of light blue linen frock fro a croquet-hoop. She felt that Frida really had onl just escaped drowning, and henceforth the river, unle a grown-up were on guard, was forbidden to her. An way, the Odyssey itself came to an end when Ulysse in shooting up Penelope's suitors, sent an arrow throug a pane of the drawing-room window.

"No more of this play for you," his aunt Hilda ruled.

"But it's finished now," he mentioned contemptuously. uch ignorance of the Odyssey grated on him. "We're oing to do the Argonauts next."

"Not in the house," said his aunt.

"Of course not," he agreed with sarcastic politeness. The Argonauts happened to be in a ship."

So through that blazing July and August the canoe rovided an inexhaustible pastime for the children. Nor as William forgotten, and though he declined to spend ny of his leisure in expeditions on the river with Harold, nuch to poor Harold's sorrow, he was always ready to ake part in the aquatic dramas invented by the others. On days when Harold had complete control of the canoe Bertram and Viola used to wander far afield from Ambles, nd it need scarcely be said that they visited the Blue Dragon as often as possible, where Farmer Pocock ould meet them sometimes and drive them out to High-ood Farm, to the great pleasure of Mrs. Pocock and the liss of her young guests. Once they brought Frida and Harold an invitation from kind Mrs. Pocock; but both f them had such heavy bilious attacks the next day that heir parents decided against their ever being exposed o the temptation of eating so much again. Hilda even ent so far as to try to put Highrood Farm out of bounds or Bertram and Viola; and she might have succeeded ut for the championship of aunt Beatrice, who now that heir uncle James was in London busy over the production f his play, which had actually been accepted by Eleanor's esperate manager for immediate production, was glad f their company. Eleanor herself had a splendid part nd wrote enthusiastically in her large handwriting of he prospects of success. Beatrice had been longing or confidants to whom she could pour out her hopes for he future. She tried George first; but George severely iscouraged any optimism about plays. He told her he ad been convinced for years that the only way he could ver make money was by a run of luck with the horses, hough, of course, he realized he should never be able to

try any of his systems, because he should never have th necessary capital. Beatrice asked him how much h wanted, and George told her that if he had five hundre pounds which he could afford to lose he should, withou doubt, soon be able to turn it into five thousand. Beatric was so anxious to find another person to dream with he of that gilded future she was fancying that she told Georg she was sure Jimmie would let him have five hundre pounds if his play were the success she really believed would be.

"And George looked at me as if I was the most complet and perfect idiot he'd ever seen," Beatrice confided t Hugh.

"I know that look," said Hugh. "He turns it on whe I talk to him about the profit from breeding pigs. An I'm bound to say that so far George's look has been justifie Our most promising youngster died this morning."

"Oh, Hugh, I am so sorry. What killed it, do yo think?"

"Mrs. Smith's cooking, without any doubt. Yo remember those beans we had at dinner two or thre days ago? Well, the pigs were given what was left the dish. Three of them have been ill since, and on died this morning. I'm not surprised. Even Harol only toyed with them."

"How naughty you are, Hugh," she said. "But Jimmie's play is a success I'll invite you to dinner wit me at the Carlton. There now!"

Hugh winked solemnly. It was clear he had no beli in James's future either.

Beatrice turned to Laurence for sympathy next; bu Laurence, who had been so deeply interested in his ow career as a dramatist, had no interest whatever in th career of James, though he did offer to consult one of h many oracles of the future about the prospect of the pla That was better than nothing; at least it was better tha nothing until Laurence announced gravely that the futu of the play was so hopeless according to the several form

of divination he had tried that the only consolation she could feel was that James's own purse was not involved.

"But it is, Laurence," she said woefully. "Jimmie's put all our money into it. That's why I was hoping to make a fortune. Still," she added with more cheerfulness, "you can't always rely on tea-leaves."

"Tea-leaves?" Laurence echoed with suave scorn. "I hope I have advanced some way in divination beyond such old wives' methods as that. And that reminds me, I hear that Hugh has lost his most promising young pig. I should like to observe the unfortunate brute's entrails when that were possible, for then I might check my prognostications for the prospects of James's success. . . ."

"Thanks very much, Laurence," said Beatrice with warm indignation, "but I'd rather not know anything about the play than hear about it from the inside of a dead pig."

With this she flounced off, tears welling in her eyes. It was then that walking with Beyle she had met Bertram and Viola and found in them the confidants for whom her emotion craved. They were ready to believe that uncle James's play had been produced amid thunders of applause, that uncle James was already as rich as uncle John, and that all the jolly things with which their grateful aunt Beatrice longed to endow them were already theirs. One of the fruits of this companionship was the way Beyle and George's two children grew to understand and appreciate one another. This entente was a genuine pleasure to Beatrice, who now always spoke of Beyle to them as cousin Bill.

And then it happened. James's play was a success, the kind of tremendous success that, even if he never wrote another successful play, would give him a decent income for the rest of his life, for not merely was he the author of it, he was also half-proprietor. The change in him when he came back to tell Beatrice what it all meant for them was astonishing. He was now as jovial and boisterous as previously he had been sardonic and taciturn.

He had already given Eleanor a good commission beside a part in which she had made a great success and which would keep her in an engagement for a year to come and now hearing from his wife about George's longing for a sum of money which he could feel he was entitled to gamble away without anxiety James presented his brother with something to go on with. George thanked him without effusiveness and gave himself the airs of a gilt-edged security when he was explaining to the donor the certainty of the yield from his investment, though he did suggest that James should not say a word to Eleanor at present about the transaction.

Soon after this James and Beatrice set out for London where she was to see the play and afterwards enjoy that holiday in France about which her husband had so often talked. He could have had this holiday whenever he asked for it from his brother John; but to James that tour of his beloved France had always been something too precious to be spoilt by the thought that it was due to the charity of a successful younger brother. The rapprochement between Bertram, Viola and Beyle allowed the bulldog to be left at Ambles in their charge without worrying about him while they were gone.

"I've often wondered," James said to his wife when they were sitting opposite one another in a first-class smoker on the way to Waterloo, "why John always pays so little attention to what the critics said about his plays. He used to laugh at them, you know."

Beatrice, who was not yet quite used to a successful husband, kept her expression prudently neutral, for she did not know whether she was still supposed to be shocked by John's indifference to the profession of which his elder brother had until so recently been a member.

"You didn't read the notices of my play?" he went on.

"No, dear. To tell the truth I was afraid to."

"Well," said James, "I did. And I laughed at them for a whole day. The next morning I got weighed. I put on five and a half pounds. At this rate I'll soon be

as round, though never quite so rosy, as John. By the way, I'm going to suggest that John invests that thousand pounds he lent me for Viola, and if he does I'll put up the same for Bertram."

"What a splendid idea, Jimmie!"

"Only," said James, "I'm going to have those pictures back, and I'm going to have the silver. And, of course, I shall apologize to Johnnie for writing that criticism of his work. Do you remember that verse of Keats I parodied?"

"No, dear," said Beatrice, trying hard to remember what Keats were.

> "*O what can ail thee, Knight-at-Arms,*
> *So staggered by the critics' tone?*
> *The pit and gallery are full,*
> *And the play has gone,*"

he quoted from the vicious article about his brother's dramatic work.

"Yes, Jimmie, I know. And I *am* so glad," she exclaimed enthusiastically. "It's simply too gorgeous, isn't it?"

James sighed. After all, what did it matter now if he had a wife who could not follow the most commonplace literary allusion? She would enjoy his play, and if he could succeed in writing another like it she would enjoy that too.

"It's an extraordinary thing," said James, turning round between his fingers the cigar he was smoking, "how very much better a Partaga tastes when it is the first you have bought with your own money than when it is the last out of the box your younger brother gave you at Christmas."

James leaned back in his corner and looked out of the window at the landscape. He was as happy as Atlas might have been if the world under which he was groaning had suddenly turned into a football at his feet.

Back in Ambles Hugh was looking critically round the library.

"Well," he was saying to George, "I think this room is vacant now, for I doubt if James will want it in the future. He'll have a library of his own soon."

But when Hugh came in from a walk that afternoon he found Laurence installed in the library.

"This is going to suit my work better than the study upstairs," he told Hugh. "I've been testing this fine old mahogany table which our good, or, as I suppose we must now call him, our great James has always kept littered with the *disjecta membra* of his literary work. Hugo lad, the response was superb. I have been working hard lately to get into touch with various murderers in the hope of finding out how much pain our modern system of hanging involves. So far I have had but poor results. Nothing to brag about, Hugh, nothing to brag about at all. But with this mahogany table I shall indubitably fare better. I did get into touch with Charles Peace for an instant, but communication was very difficult. His spirit seemed extraordinarily shy of discussing the scaffold. All he would write time after time in response to my questions was 'Cock-a-doodle-do.' It was disappointing, very."

Hugh left Laurence, his mind firmly made up to take immediate steps to get rid of him and Hilda. James' unexpected success with a play had filled him with emulation. Moreover, James was now a possible capitalist who might easily be persuaded to invest money in the scheme of turning Ambles into an hotel. No time must be lost. It was nearly the end of August. John was coming back early in September. It was vital to have the house clear of encumbrances before he put the project up to him and James.

Next morning at breakfast Bertram had a letter and announced gleefully that Higginbotham had been allowed to come and stay with him for a week.

Hugh responded graciously to his nephew's desire for

him to read Higginbotham's letter. He was interested in a letter from Higginbotham, because in his plot it was to be a letter from Higginbotham that was to start the process of eliminating Hilda from Ambles.

"Let me see," Hugh asked, as he took the letter, "you said his father was Governor of British Honduras, didn't you?"

"No," Bertram replied, "I said his governor was doing something in British Honduras, and that Higginbotham had two sets of unused British Honduras which he swapped for marbles."

"Ah, yes, I remember now," said Hugh. "He's very keen on marbles, isn't he?"

"Frightfully keen. He has more big Indians than any other boy in old Hackett's school."

"Big Indians from British Honduras?" Harold asked, his glasses goggling.

"No, you fat-headed lunatic, marbles!"

"Bertram," interposed Harold's mother, "I will not have these horrible expressions used at table. And don't churn up your marmalade with your butter in that disgusting way."

"But of course Higginbotham knows all about Indians," Hugh said kindly. It was essential to fire Harold's imagination with the wonders of Higginbotham as a personality.

"I don't think he knows as much about Indians as my dear father," said Harold.

"No, no, I don't suppose he does," Hugh assented genially.

Bertram and Viola stared at their uncle. This exchange of cordialities with Harold did not altogether please them.

Hugh turned to Higginbotham's letter.

222 Marina Terrace,
Dear Touchwood, *Southsea.*

Thank you very much for asking me to come and stay with you. Mother says I can come for a week

but not longer, because I must go and stay with my uncle and aunt at Essex before I go back to school. I have had a jolly good time these hols and I can do the back-stroke; can you? I have been swimming every day and sometimes twice. I will tell you what regiments I have seen. Mother says I can arrive at 1.35 *on Tuesday if that is convenient.*

Yours truly,
J. Higginbotham.

"Very good, clear letter," Hugh commented. "I should think he was a youth of character. How old is he?"

"He's a month and eleven days older than me," said Bertram.

"What an odd way to sign himself," Hilda commented, when Hugh had tactfully passed the letter on to her. "I should have thought that at least he would have signed himself 'your affectionate friend.'"

"Well, he hasn't seen me all this last term," said Bertram, blushing hotly under this criticism of Higginbotham.

"Well, if I hadn't seen a friend only since April," Viola observed, "I wouldn't write like that."

"Shut up, V," her brother scowled. Then he muttered something in her ear.

"I'm not, I'm not," Viola cried, flaming in turn. "Pooh, I wouldn't be if he was going to stay with you for a year."

"Viola jealous, eh?" asked Hilda, with ready malice.

Her niece's answer was to leap up from her chair and rush out of the room.

"It's easy to see whose child *she* is," Hilda observed to Edith, who kindly brought the conversation away from Viola and back to Higginbotham.

"What does J. stand for, Bertram?"

"Well, I know," said Bertram, "because he told me

nce as a frightful secret, but I don't think I can tell ou."

"That sounds excessively scrupulous, Bertram," aurence put in. "Are we all to address this young entleman by the not over euphonious and inconveniently ngthy name of Higginbotham?"

"Well, perhaps he'll tell you his Christian name, but don't think he will, because when his brother was at ld Hackett's school he called him Minor always."

"I've got all the Christian names beginning with J n my Sixpenny Pocket Encyclopedia," Harold announced, so I'll be able to guess what Higginbotham's name ."

"He'll smack your head if you do," Bertram threatened.

"He sounds a very unpleasant person, this friend of ours, Bertram," Hilda observed.

"Oh, I don't believe he'll do anything of the kind," Hugh interposed quickly. "I think he and Harold are oing to be bosom pals in no time, and even if his name s Jehoshaphat I'll bet he tells Harold."

"His name isn't Jehoshaphat," Bertram said indignantly. "And you needn't laugh at him, uncle Hugh. He's quite a decent chap, he is really."

"I'm not laughing at him," said Hugh. "On the ontrary, I'm looking forward immensely to his visit. He sounds a stout fellow. You must get him to tell you bout British Honduras, Harold."

"He hasn't been there since he was a baby," Bertram aid. "His governor comes over to England for six nonths every two years."

"Well, he won't be able to tell me much about Indians," Harold observed.

"Won't he?" Hugh exclaimed. "Don't you believe t! I bet he had an Indian nurse. Didn't he have an ndian nurse, Bertram?"

"I don't know," said Bertram sulkily. He was beginning to wish he had never invited Higginbotham to ome and stay at Ambles. What between the criticism

his people were evidently going to indulge in at Higgin botham's expense and the criticism that Higginbotham would certainly indulge in at theirs life did not look quit so promising for the visit as once upon a time.

However, Hugh was soon able to allay the injury t Bertram's friendship, and, though Viola remained hostil and sullen, it was with most of the old excitement o seeing Higginbotham again that Bertram set out in th dog-cart to meet him. He wished that Pobjoy had bee driving instead of Hugh, because he felt that uncle Hugh' presence might cause constraint. But Hugh was deter mined to take the reins on this hospitable occasion, an Bertram made the best of it. After all, uncle Hugh wa the most presentable of the family, and he might quit easily make a good impression on Higginbotham.

"We're a bit ahead of time," Hugh observed as the clattered into Wrottesford High Street and saw the churc clock. "What about looking round to see if we can' find some of those Indian marbles for Higginbotham?"

"Do you mean donnay them to him?" Bertram asked

"Yes, I thought he'd appreciate the attention."

"But you don't know him," Bertram objected. "Yo can't go and suddenly give him some marbles like that He'd feel a frightful ass if you did."

"You think he would?"

"Besides," Bertram went on, "marbles are over now Conkers begin next term."

"Right-o," Hugh agreed pleasantly, "the last thin I want to do is to embarrass Higginbotham. We'll loo in and say good-morning to Mrs. Pringle."

So they looked in at the Blue Dragon, and she wa of course, the essence of tact.

"I've got a friend coming to stay with me," Bertra announced over his lemon and dash.

"That's good news," said the hostess. "I hope you' bring him in here on your way out. I expect a lemon an dash is just about what he'll be feeling like after th train. Where's he coming from? London?"

"No, Southsea."

"Southsea? Well, if that doesn't beat the band? It's a small world right enough. Why, Southsea's where Mr. Pringle and me went for our honeymoon. Oh dear, yes, Southsea has many happy memories for me. We used to mouch about on Southsea Common in the moonlight, and Mr. Pringle wrote some poetry, a thing he'd never done before and never did again except once, and which was when he was one over the eight at a New Year festivity, and then he wrote a verse of poetry about the old year going out. There was always a few minutes when Mr. Pringle got a bit weepy on such occasions, but it didn't usually last long enough for him to write any poetry about it. But he was never quarrelsome. Never. I never heard him say an angry word once whatever he'd had. His last stage before I used to see him off up to bed was to sit and twiddle his thumbs and smile at everybody like a blessed new-born babe. He was a wonderful man, one in a million, you might say."

Who does not know the emotion of returning to a garden after a few weeks' absence and finding that the vegetable marrows have in the interval grown to rival air-ships in size and shape? This is only one of the many examples that might be chosen to illustrate the emotion which Bertram felt when he saw Higginbotham alight from the train on that blue August morning. When he had parted with his friend in the hall of Mr. Hackett's preparatory school for the sons of gentlemen not yet five months ago, he had parted with a moon-faced stolid boy, larger than himself it was true, but not so much larger as to make the difference of forty-two days in their age appear absolutely ludicrous. He now beheld rolling along the platform toward him one who was indeed still recognizable as Higginbotham, but a Higginbotham swollen to such monstrous proportions that if his friend had been rolling along the platform away from him he might have supposed him to be some shooting-tenant who had arrived in Hampshire to try to get some of his fat off by walking after

partridges across the shimmering September stubble. A swift regret went through Bertram's mind that they had not waited to enact the Odyssey until the arrival of Higginbotham, for here was the ideal Polyphemus, a part in which Harold had been a complete failure.

"Is *that* Higginbotham?" Hugh exclaimed in amazement. "But what an extraordinary suit of clothes he is wearing!"

"Look out, uncle Hugh, he'll hear you," Bertram whispered. Criticism of Higginbotham's tailor was not the way to celebrate their reunion. It was true that Higginbotham was wearing an extraordinary suit of clothes. His mother in despair of keeping pace with his rapid growth had finally discovered at the bottom of a trunk a suit which Higginbotham's father twenty-five years ago had been able to wear without exciting a curious glance. But it was a suit which wanted mutton-chop whiskers and a check ulster over the arm to carry it off. Higginbotham looked as inappropriate in it as a hermit crab in an old tin of anchovy paste or the comic man of a pierrot troop at church parade on Sunday. Higginbotham had felt this himself and had said to his mother in his stolid way:

"Oh, mother, I can't wear this suit."

And she had replied:

"Well, my dear boy, you burst all the seams of that Norfolk suit I bought you for the summer holidays, and I really cannot afford to buy you another until you stop growing for a while."

"But it stinks of camphor."

"I can't help it, Joe. You must put up with this suit till the end of the holidays, for I'll have to buy you a new Eton suit for next term, and I did count on your being able to wear Charlie's."

Yes, Higginbotham's name was Joseph; but he ran no risk like the first of his name of exciting the envy of his brethren by this suit of many colours, with which his father unknown to himself had presented him.

"Hullo, Higginbotham," said Bertram when his friend was within hail.

"Hullo, Touchwood," said Higginbotham.

Then they grinned at one another, blushed, looked away, looked back, and grinned again.

"This is my uncle Hugh," Bertram explained apologetically.

"How are you, Higginbotham?" said Hugh heartily.

"Quite well, thank you," said the new-comer, turning as deep a red as a jar of pickled cabbage, and looking away again.

"Good journey?"

"Yes, thank you."

"How's Southsea?"

"Quite well, thank you."

"Bertram's been frightfully excited by the prospect of your arrival."

Higginbotham gave a sickly smile, and Bertram frowned uneasily. His uncle was trespassing dangerously near to embarrassing personal revelations.

"I vote we go along," he said.

There was another awkward pause at the ticket-barrier owing to Higginbotham's ticket having got wedged somewhere between two rolls of fat. A needle in a haystack would have been obvious compared with that railway ticket among the multiple corrugations of Higginbotham's body. However, luckily it was dislodged in the struggle and fell down at the collector's feet.

"We'll take Higginbotham in and introduce him to Mrs. Pringle, I think," said Hugh.

Bertram looked doubtful. Great as was his respect for Mrs. Pringle and deep as was his affection, he feared that the sudden appearance of Higginbotham in her snuggery might for once tempt her into indiscreet comment. However, Hugh did not give him a chance to object, but pulled up outside the Blue Dragon.

"Hullo," she said to Bertram, when they entered, "hasn't your little friend come, then? That's too bad.

And you were so looking forward to his arriving, weren't you ? "

" But this is Higginbotham, Mrs. Pringle," Bertram told her.

" What ? " the hostess gasped. " Well, you do surprise me. Why, I thought this was the strong man from the circus which is here for a night, who'd just happened to come in with you. But didn't you tell me he was a school friend of yours ? "

" So he is."

" How old is he then ? "

" He's thirteen. He's a month and eleven days older than me."

" Well, either he's the biggest whopper I ever saw or else that's the biggest whopper I ever heard. Why, Mr Pringle was not so much bigger than that when he was tool at the last. Well, I've seen nothing like it since I was a nipper and paid a penny in a booth to see the Fat Boy of Barking."

It was falling out as Bertram had feared. Even Mrs Pringle's tact was not proof against the shock of Higginbotham's immensity. Bertram looked quickly and nervously at his friend to see what wound upon his dignity her mention of fat had inflicted.

But Higginbotham was by now proof against such remarks as Mrs. Pringle's. He was as indifferent as a national monument to the criticisms of correspondents in *The Times*.

" Well," said Mrs. Pringle, " I reckon you'd like a good long drink anyway. I'm not a small-made woman myself and I know how this August weather draws the damp out of anybody."

And by the way Higginbotham put down a lemon and dash twice as large as Bertram's in half the time it was evident that Mrs. Pringle had judged his condition accurately.

" My word," she said, " I was reading a letter in the *Hampshire Herald* only this morning about somebody

t Galton who'd grown a giant gooseberry bigger than any rown yet. I'm bothered if I haven't a good mind to vrite and say I've seen a boy of thirteen who'd make a ooseberry the size of a goose's egg look silly. My word," he went on, turning to Bertram, "this is going to make he Infant Stanley polish his gig-lamps, and no mistake."

"He's only grown big like this since the term before ast," Bertram explained. "He wasn't big last April."

"What, he's grown that size in four months?" Mrs. Pringle gasped. "Why, he'll be what they call a mammoth before another week or two at that rate. Can you feel yourself growing?" she asked.

"I feel my clothes getting tighter sometimes," Higginbotham admitted.

"I'll be bound you do. Still, there's one thing you've got a good name to grow up to. Anybody with a name ike yours would need to be a bit bigger than a weevil, or it would sound ridiculous. Well, there must have been ome high tides at Southsea this summer if you did much athing."

"Higginbotham can do the back-stroke," Bertram nformed her.

"And the overarm," Higginbotham added solemnly.

"Oh, I don't doubt but what he's as active as a whale," Mrs. Pringle declared. "Did you do any diving?"

"Yes, a bit," said Higginbotham modestly.

"A bit? Why, it must have been like the launch of he Margate lifeboat every time you went in."

Hugh had taken no part in this conversation. Sipping pink gin, he had sat apart and studied the personality f Higginbotham. At first he had been somewhat taken back by the size of him. But when he had recovered rom the shock he began to see in Higginbotham the deal instrument for his purpose. It would be impossible o imagine that Harold would not be tempted by the rospect of exploring British Honduras under the auspices f this thirteen-year-old giant. The longer Hugh conidered him, the more likely he seemed to be able to lure

Harold away with him. And Higginbotham himself was much less difficult than Bertram had led him to suppose he might be. Probably the amount of weight he had put on during these months had stifled any tendency to develop a temperament. There was nothing like fat for making people amenable. Provided of course there was not too much of it to be bearable, as in the case of Henry VIII. A boy who allowed his mother to unearth a suit that Dr. Watson might have thought twice about wearing on the foggiest day in Baker Street, and then consented to travel in it, must have a naturally agreeable disposition on which it should be easy to work. Still, in spite of what Bertram said, there could surely be no harm in trying to cultivate that good nature still more by trading on its passion for large Indian marbles.

"Did you have a good term with marbles, Higginbotham?" Hugh asked.

"I don't play marbles now."

"You don't?"

"It was too hot last term. I swopped them all for ices."

"Ah, you like ices?"

Higginbotham nodded.

"Come along," said Hugh, "we've just got time to have three or four at Mrs. Bagshaw's excellent sweet-shop before we drive back. You won't find much variety there, Higginbotham, but they're splendidly cold."

Higginbotham's pale blue eyes lighted up with a boreal radiance. Bertram, too, grinned appreciatively. This was the way an uncle ought to behave.

"Vanillerorstrorberry?" gloomily inquired Mrs. Bagshaw, one of those dried-up old women whom a lifetime devoted to listening to children trying to make up their minds how to invest a halfpenny has taught to regard with hostility every customer who enters her shop.

"Don't tire yourself trying to decide which you'll have, Higginbotham," said his entertainer. "Have one of each—or two of each if you can manage them."

Hugh watched Higginbotham eat two strawberry ices

d one vanilla while Bertram was still labouring through s second mixed.

" You must come into Wrottesford and eat ices with y nephew Harold," said Hugh. " He's so fond of ices at he's thinking of exploring the South Pole when he ows up. Have another ? "

" No, thank you," said the visitor regretfully. Three ge sixpenny ices on top of that large lemon and dash top of the varied nourishment he had taken to sustain m during the journey from Southsea were as much as felt he could carry for the moment. However, Hugh ncied that about an hour after lunch he would be feeling e eating something again. So he bought a large stock Mrs. Bagshaw's sweets, and the old lady actually smiled nen she bade them good morning. And well she might. ere was only ninepence change out of a ten-shilling piece. Consisting as it did almost entirely of eating sweets ovided by Hugh, there is little to say about Higgin-tham's visit. To Bertram it was a disappointment. be sure, his friend still collected the regiments of the itish Army; but his two visits to Southsea had given m such a commanding lead over Bertram that the latter cided to give up, particularly as Higginbotham was ing on from Ambles to stay near Colchester, another rrison town. Viola, who had dreaded Higginbotham's rival for the breach it was likely to cause between her other and herself, soon discovered that she had nothing fear from such a rival. An attempt was made to take vantage of Higginbotham's size to enact David and liath; but it ended in failure because Goliath went off th Harold on an expedition up the river in the canoe, d David managed somehow, while practising his sling ring the long wait for Goliath to return, to catch himself ch a whack on the head that he had to retire to his om and lie down for the rest of the afternoon. This mpulsory retirement consolidated the friendship between rold and Higginbotham. They were always paddling the river together after that, the canoe at an angle

of forty-five degrees, Harold's glasses visible as they seem to glint along the bank, and Higginbotham at the oth end hardly a couple of inches out of the water. To Harol Higginbotham soon became Joe, and that was the la straw for Bertram, who, though he knew his name was Jo had not yet ventured to trespass so far upon their intima as to suggest calling him by it. It was indeed a bad we for Bertram. Even his uncle Hugh seemed to have turn against him and to care for nothing but loading Harold a Higginbotham with sweets of every size and shape and hu

"I think your friend Higginbotham is a most gent manly boy," Hilda observed to Bertram.

"I think he's a caddish lout," said Viola fiercely, glad though she was to be relieved of the anxiety Higginbotham's rivalry she resented his alliance wi Harold as a despicable and sordid alliance cemented the stickiness of sweets.

"No, he's not, V. So shut up," said Bertram, struggli to retain a loyalty for his friend, though the effort nea cost him tears.

"A hulking fat greedy guzzling guts," Viola continue

"Silence, Viola," her aunt commanded. "It's a lo time since I saw a more nicely behaved quiet and gent manly boy."

"I quite agree with you, Hilda," said Hugh warmly.

Viola and Bertram could not stand this. They walk all the way into Wrottesford and poured their grievan into the sympathetic ears of Mrs. Pringle.

"It don't sound natural to me, the way your uncl carrying on," she commented. "You mark my wor he's got something up his sleeve. He's not a missing h or anything, is he, this Higginbotham?"

The children looked puzzled.

"Oh, well," said Mrs. Pringle, "I have my own though and thought don't have to be paid for. Now what y both want is a good tea, and afterwards I'll drive you ba in the victorier."

Hilda was so much taken by Higginbotham's cha

hat she actually telegraphed his mother to ask if his visit ight be prolonged for another week. Mrs. Higginbotham ave the necessary permission; and Bertram was now xposed to the almost intolerable mortification of having o be a spectator of Higginbotham staying on at Ambles as he guest of Harold.

Hugh took Harold and Higginbotham into Galton to elebrate the occasion by spending so much in the Galton weetshop as he had spent with Mrs. Bagshaw. When ney came back, they were actually talking of life together n British Honduras.

"It'll be a great thing for Harold to have a friend out here like Joe Higginbotham," Hugh told his sister.

And even Hilda seemed half-reconciled to the notion of British Honduras by the only product of it she had ever seen.

It was Harold who drove in with Hugh to see Higginotham off. It was Harold who saw Hugh press upon Higginbotham the last half-pound of Mrs. Bagshaw's uit gums to console himself on the way to Waterloo. It as Harold who received Higginbotham's letter from somewhere near Colchester to say that he had enjoyed his isit very much. And it was Harold who, glittering with elf-importance, found and brought down to his mother he odds and ends Higginbotham had left behind, which ncluded his tooth-brush, the left foot of his sand-shoes, he right foot of his black boots, the upper half of his yjamas, and all his collars.

"Well, George," said Hugh on the evening of Higginotham's departure, "I've worked jolly hard this fortnight nd I've spent about a couple of quid on sweets and ices, ut I think I shall get Hilda out of Ambles all right. Read hat letter."

George picked up the letter which his brother had tossed im and read:

Dear Harold,

My father has sent a letter to say that I must go out to Belize on September 14th from Liverpool. I

want you to come with me. Can you run away from Ambles and meet me at Waterloo on September 13th by the same train I went by? The Captain of the boat is a friend of my father and will take you out for nothing. Do not refuse, dear Harold. I cannot go to British Honduras without you.

Your affectionate friend,
Joe.

P.S. Bring your blow-pipe, because we can easily get some poisoned darts from the Indians.

"You don't mean to say you persuaded that elephantine youth to write that?" George exclaimed.

"No, no, no, of course not," said Hugh. "I wrote it myself; but it's a capital imitation of his handwriting."

"I should have thought you'd have had enough of forgery by now," said George. "You got yourself into a nice mess over imitating people's handwriting once before. And you don't suppose that even Harold will be such a blithering little idiot as to go up to Waterloo in answer to that?"

"Of course not," said Hugh. "This is only to make Hilda think he's gone to British Honduras, when I kidnap Harold."

"You talk more tommy-rot sometimes than anybody I ever met," said George. "You'll be telling me next that you're going to kidnap that clown Laurence."

"No, I've got another plan to get rid of Laurence. You wait, George. James's play has been a success. My hotel's going to be a success."

"Well, as long as you don't try to drag me into it," George said, "I don't really care what you do. With this money which James has invested in my system I hope to get a good return presently."

Two days after this conversation Hugh took Bertram aside.

"Bertram, I want you to suggest to Harold a moonlight expedition in the canoe to go and gather mushrooms."

But Bertram was not to be won back so easily, and certainly not to spoil Harold by any more indulgence.

"I don't want to ask the little brute to come mushrooming," he said with emphasis.

"I shall get William to ask him if you don't," Hugh warned him.

"Well, get William if you like," said his offended nephew.

It was evidently going to take Hugh a little time to live down his treacherous behaviour during the visit of Higginbotham.

CHAPTER XIV

THE WICKED UNCLE

ON the morning of the thirteenth of September, two days after Hugh's suggestion that Bertram should take Harold mushrooming, the dining-room at Ambles was pervaded with the rich odour of grilled mushrooms.

"Harold brought us these," his mother announced proudly when everybody had commented on the delicacy of their flavour. "He got up at four o'clock this morning and went off with William like a little Trojan with a basket on each arm."

More praise of Harold's enterprise followed, which was grateful to Hilda's maternal ear.

"You other children ought to be thinking about blackberries now," she took the occasion to say to Bertram with an implied criticism of his sloth.

"Well, blackberries are a frightful fag to pick," he pointed out. "It takes much longer to fill a basket and besides it's hotter. Mushrooming is much easier. It's cool then, and it doesn't take any time to fill a basket."

"Ah, I thought you would find some excuse for being disobliging," she commented.

"Well, blackberries are much more of a swot to pick," Viola joined in.

"I did not invite your remarks, Viola," her aunt said coldly. "Who will run upstairs and see if Harold has fallen asleep and not heard the breakfast gong?" Hilda was anxious that Harold should hear some of the tributes

to his industry from those who were so much enjoying the mushrooms he had gathered.

Bertram and Viola sat close. They saw no reason why they should go scooting upstairs to fetch Harold. There had been altogether a great deal too much of Harold recently.

Edith, perceiving with what evident relish Laurence was tucking into the mushrooms, thought it would be nice if Frida expressed the appreciation of the family by running upstairs to warn Harold that unless he were quick he would be the only one not to taste his own spoils.

Presently Frida came down to say that Harold was not in his room.

"Not in his room?" Hilda repeated. "Where can he be, then? How very odd!"

"Perhaps he's gone blackberrying," Hugh suggested.

"Oh, I should hardly think he'd do that without waiting for his breakfast. I told him to be sure and lie down when he came in, so as not to be dreadfully tired for the rest of the day after getting up so early."

Breakfast came to an end without Harold's appearing, and Hilda sent for William to find out if her son had returned with him.

To her dismay she found he had not.

"Do you mean to say, William, that you didn't wait when you found Master Harold was nowhere to be seen?"

"Well, I thought he'd gone on home."

"Why think?" he was asked. "Why not make sure?"

A somewhat agitated examination of William elicited from him that at a quarter to four he had called Harold by climbing up the ladder and tapping on his window, and that a few minutes later Harold had descended by the ladder and joined him in the yard.

"But why not come into the house and wake him properly?" he was asked again.

William kicked one boot against the other, silent and

sheepish. He had been told by Hugh on no account to reveal that just before he called Harold by way of the ladder, he had called Hugh by the same route.

"Well, never mind about that question now," Hilda went on sharply. "Where did you go to gather the mushrooms?"

They had walked over the twenty-acre field and down through the water-meadows as far as the bridge by Four Lanes Farm. Here they had crossed the river and started their gathering in the fields on the other side. It had been very misty. At about five o'clock William had called to Harold to say that his baskets were full, but there had been no reply. He had waited for some time; but hearing nothing more from Harold he supposed Harold had filled his baskets and gone back home.

"But didn't you go and look if he was in his room when you came back?" Hilda asked.

No, William had not considered it necessary. It had never occurred to him that anything could possibly have happened to Harold.

"But he might have fallen into the river," she exclaimed.

"There weren't no splash," William objected.

"What splash would Master Harold's body make?"

"It would have made a big enough splash for me to hear, that time of the morning," William maintained positively. "When he and young Higginbotham . . ."

"Young Mr. Higginbotham."

"When he and young Higginbotham," William continued obstinately, "were swimming one day, Farmer Willett came down to see if his bullocks had crossed the river, because he could hear 'un splashing two fields away. So I reckon I'd have heard Harold . . ."

"Master Harold," Hilda interrupted sharply. "If you cannot speak respectfully, William, you will have to leave."

"Well, dang it, I'll leave right away," William declared in exasperation; and he flung his cap down at his feet to mark the strength of his resolve. "I'd sooner go to

ea and be badgered about there than be badgered about ere the way I am."

"Badgered about indeed!" Hilda scoffed. "That's a ice way to talk, when perhaps you're the last person who aw poor Master Harold alive."

"Well, if he were drownded in the river," William asked, how come he to leave his baskets of musheroons on the itchen table?"

"Left his baskets of mushrooms on the kitchen table?"

"In course he did. When I come back wi'out 'un, I ent to put my baskets in, and there was Harold's askets."

"Why didn't you tell me that before, you stupid boy?"

"Because you didn't axe me. How's anybody to tell hat they bean't never axed?"

"Well, go away now," said Hilda fretfully.

"I'm going away," he replied. "I'm going away, and ain't never coming back no more."

"If you do, you'll get no character from me," she warned im.

"I don't want no character from you," William retorted. I reckon if I want a character Mr. Hugh will give me a haracter right enough."

Hilda found in Mrs. Smith a sympathizer over the iquities of William.

"That boy—well, I say boy, Mrs. Curtis, but really np would be the truer word, for a more unnatural boy never did see, but boy or imp he'll come to a bad end, nd if he is so daring as to run away and go to sea, he'll e food for fishes yet. Still, it was right what he said bout Master Harold's baskets. Sure enough, when I ome down into the kitchen this morning, there was four askets brimming over on the kitchen table. So I wouldn't ake on too much, Mrs. Curtis, because it's my belief laster Harold must have gone off blackberrying or mething."

But the morning wore away without any sign or sound Harold. He had vanished as utterly as Proserpine

from those Sicilian fields when Pluto carried her off in his chariot to the darkness of the nether world.

At lunch Mrs. Smith sent in some more mushrooms; but nobody except George and Hugh had the heart to eat them. Even Bertram and Viola abstained, though possibly their abstention was due less to mourning over Harold's loss than to the quantity they had already eaten for breakfast. They proposed, however, to search the woods after lunch with Beyle as an understudy for a bloodhound.

"You don't suppose that dog will ever sniff out Harold, do you?" asked Hugh.

"Why not?"

"Look at his nose."

"Well, he sniffed out that pig when we took it up to father's room," Bertram reminded his uncle.

"And he sniffed out those bones we had for the Sirens," Viola added. "So I expect he'll sniff out Harold if he's anywhere near."

Beyle thoroughly enjoyed his walk, being under the impression that he was being urged to find a stray cat. This excited his detective ambition to such an extent that he did ultimately find in a bush the body of a rabbit which had been dead about a fortnight. Nothing would induce him to drop this loathsome relic, and possibly prompted by some dim doggy notion that Hilda wanted sympathy he brought it all the way back to the house and left it under her bed, where it gradually filled the room with a charnel atmosphere which by no means added to her cheerfulness.

After tea, when Harold was still missing and there had even been a proposal to drag the river, his mother accepted Hugh's offer to drive her into Galton to inform the police of what had happened. This done, they drove on into Wrottesford; and, while Hilda was giving the Wrottesford police a full description of her son, Hugh went into the Blue Dragon, where he asked Mrs. Pringle to speak to him privately.

"Whatever is it?" she exclaimed in a fluster.

"I want you to do something for me, Mrs. Pringle."

"Well, if it's anything within reason," she began.

"I just want you to say that my nephew Harold came into the Blue Dragon this morning shortly before ten o'clock and borrowed half a sovereign from you."

"Oh, you don't want me to lend *you* any money?" said Mrs. Pringle.

"No, no," Hugh replied with a smile. "I never borrow from my friends."

"But why should I say all this?" she asked.

"I want my sister, Mrs. Curtis, to think that her son has gone up to London to meet Higginbotham."

Mrs. Pringle grinned at him broadly.

"There now, what did I say to Bertram and Violet?"

"What did you say?"

"Why, I said you had something up your sleeve. Well, I haven't lived to my age without knowing who are the artful ones, and that's a sure thing. I knew you were playing some game with that thirteen-year-old mammoth. He's a missing heir, isn't he?"

"Not that I know of."

"Oh, all right. I'm not curious. But I think as you want my help you might tell me what it's all about."

"I don't mind telling you. It's quite simple. I want my sister to go away for a few days while I make some arrangements with builders and decorators about my hotel scheme for Ambles. And if she thinks Harold has gone to London she'll go after him. That's the plan."

Mrs. Pringle winked slowly.

"You're a deep one, aren't you? Still, as I say, I'm not curious, and if there's to be any dirty work at the cross-roads, perhaps it's just as well I shouldn't know too much. So I'm to say the Infant Stanley came in here about ten o'clock this morning and borrowed a half a sovering off me?"

"That's right."

"Here, wait a bit. Supposing his ma starts in to pay me back? That's obtaining money by false pretences."

"I'll pay you back myself. Come along, Mrs. Pringle, be a sport. I wouldn't ask you to do this if it weren't going to be a good thing in the long run for Bertram and Viola."

"Good thing for them, is it? Well, if you could have heard the way they carried on about you last time they came in to see me, you wouldn't think they expected anything except the worst from you. Carried on alarming they did. And that's the truth I'm telling you."

"It was all part of my game."

"Oh, I know that, my dear man," she said. "I told them so. I said you were after a missing heir. Well I'm not a baby in arms."

Hugh decided that he had better accept her own theory of his behaviour.

"Mrs. Pringle, I'll be frank with you. Higginbotham *is* a missing heir."

She clapped her hands gleefully.

"What did I say? Well, I'm glad you've had the common decency to own up. You might have known I wouldn't stand in the way of anybody who was on the track of a missing heir. Romance runs in our family. I had a grandfather who used to give penny readings which were very highly thought of. Well, now we understand each other I'll ring the bell, and we'll have one. A brandy and water, I suppose?"

"A very quick one," said Hugh, "because I must go and fetch my sister."

So long as Hugh had talked to Mrs. Pringle about builders and decorators coming to Ambles, she had been reserved in her willingness to help. Now, with the prospect of a missing heir and the gratification of having guessed right, she expanded. By the time Hilda had been fetched from the police station, she was not only ready to invent Harold's appearance in the Blue Dragon, but ready to produce the letter Hugh had written in Higginbotham's name as a clue which Harold had left behind him.

Even Hugh's assurance that she would hear something

lefinite about Harold's whereabouts at the Blue Dragon vas hardly enough to mitigate for Hilda the disgrace of ntering a public-house, and she was thankful to reach Mrs. Pringle's private room without having been observed y anybody except the waiter.

"My brother tells me you can give me some news of my ittle boy," she began stiffly.

"I can," Mrs. Pringle replied impressively, "and vhat's more I will. But first of all, what are you going o take?"

"Nothing, thank you."

"Oh, a little drop of something serious will do you good. glass of port?"

"No, thank you."

"Sherry?"

"No, thank you,"

"You wouldn't take a brandy?" Mrs. Pringle whis- ered, with an expression compounded of immense iscretion, boundless comprehension of human weakness, nd frank temptation.

"No, thank you indeed. I never drink anything," aid Hilda a little irritably. "And I've already had ea."

Mrs. Pringle sighed, and shook her head compassionately.

"Teetotal, eh? Well, it can't be helped."

"My little boy . . ." Hilda resumed.

"That's right. Him I call the Infant Stanley. My ord, yes, you can see his brains regularly sprouting under ose glasses of his, the same as if the heat was drawing em out. Well, about a quarter to ten this morning, r anyway not after ten to, I was in the snuggery, looking ound to see if all was in trim when who should come in ut the Infant Stanley. 'Good morning,' I said, 'you're n early bird this fine morning, and no mistake.' And he aid, 'Yes.'"

The emotion of this narrative was too much for Mrs. ringle at this point. She leaned over and rang the bell.

"Well," she said, "if you won't have something a little

more tiddlified than the thought of a cup of tea you had earlier in the afternoon, I believe I will if you'll excuse me. What's yours, Mr. Touchwood ? "

" The usual," said Hugh.

" That's right. Two brandies," she told the waiter when he answered the bell. " Let me see, where was I ? " she asked her listeners.

" My little boy had just come in to—er—your snuggery," said Hilda distastefully.

" That's right. ' Yes,' he said, ' Mrs. Pringle, I am early and that's a fact,' he said, ' because I'm off up to London on business and I came in to see if you would kindly oblige me with the loan of a half a sovering.' ' A half a sovering ? ' I said, because I was a bit took aback with the calm way he spoke. ' Yes,' he said, ' and my uncle Hugh,' he said, ' will give it to you if you tell him I borrowed it off you,' he said. He made a great point of that," Mrs. Pringle declared, turning round to Hugh. Then she turned back to Hilda and continued: " Of knowing Mr. Touchwood here, and of course the Infant Stanley, I put my hand in the till and took out the half a sovering without so much as a thought, you might say. And he said, ' Thank you very much, Mrs. Pringle. I wouldn't have troubled you,' he said, ' only I was afraid I might miss my business appointment in London.' "

" But I don't understand," said Hilda in a bewildered voice.

" Oh, you don't understand ? " Mrs. Pringle repeated, taking a long sip at her brandy and water. " Well, I do wish you'd have something. I always think it's so difficult to understand anything out of the usual on a dry stomach. Of course I don't understand either, as you might say, but he seemed so set on this visit to London, and, knowing him to be full of brains, I saw no harm in his going. Well, of course I wouldn't. Naturally, I'd no idea he hadn't taken you into his confidence over this business trip. However, when he was gone I noticed a bit of paper on the floor where he'd been standing. So I popped round

the other side of the counter and picked it up. I can't say I understand what it's all about. But perhaps you will."

With this Mrs. Pringle handed Hilda the letter written by Hugh.

"British Honduras?" Hilda gasped.

"That's where he's apparently off to with this Joe, the Wild Boy from Borneo. If there *is* such a place as British Honduras, and which I don't think. It sounds to me a pure invention, as they say. I do wish you'd have a drop of something," she urged Hilda anxiously. "You're looking quite faint."

Poor Hilda shook her head.

"Hugh, have you read this?"

"I glanced at it," he admitted. "I was afraid something like this would happen as soon as I saw Higginbotham. I knew Harold wouldn't be able to resist going off with him if he was invited."

"But no time must be lost," the distracted mother exclaimed. "We must telegraph to all the docks and have every outgoing steamer searched."

"Too late, my dear Hilda, too late," said her brother. "By this time, in the words of the old nautical song, Harold is rolling down to Rio."

"But he may not have sailed yet."

"No hope of that, Hilda," said Hugh compassionately. "Higginbotham is not the sort of boy to leave anything to chance. You may depend upon it that, when he told Harold to travel by the same train as he had travelled by last week, he was not taking any risk of having their project interfered with. I've no doubt whatever that he and Harold went on board at once, and by this time are already in the Downs."

"The ups and downs, I should say," Mrs. Pringle put in.

"It's very worrying for you, of course," Hugh went on to his sister, "but still you can always get out to British Honduras yourself. Here's yesterday's *Daily Telegraph*. Let's look at the sailings. Yes, here's a steamer leaving

for New Orleans next Wednesday. That's your ship Hilda. You must book your passage, and you'll get down by one of the fruit boats from New Orleans to Belize. You might even arrive before Harold. I can't find any steamer sailing about now for British Honduras, so probably he's gone in some cargo boat by way of various West Indian islands. This is going to be a delightful experience for him. Yes, if I were you, I'd go right up to London to-morrow and make my arrangements for sailing next Wednesday."

"Well, I can at least send a telegram to Mrs. Higginbotham," said Hilda.

"Of course you can, if you think that will do any good."

"Well, the woman must know what steamer her son has gone in. But I don't understand why she should have made such a point of his going to stay with that uncle and aunt in Essex."

"I shouldn't be surprised if she knew nothing at all about Higginbotham's having gone away. He's evidently fallen in with this old friend of his father's and been offered a free passage. Probably this old salt was sorry for Higginbotham and didn't like to see him walking about in those clothes. Anyway you can't do anything to-night. You'd better sleep over it, Hilda. You mustn't blame Mrs. Pringle for lending Harold that half-sovereign. By the way, I think I'd better pay you back, Mrs. Pringle," Hugh went on.

"Well, I'm sure I wish I hadn't lent it to him now," said the hostess as she accepted the coin gravely. "And I wouldn't have done if I'd have thought it was going to cause so much anxiety. But fancy him escaping like that. Well, if he goes on as he's begun he'll make poor old Robinson Crusoe and Sindbad the Sailor look like a couple of Margate trippers. It shows how set he is on this exploring."

"Oh, he's as keen as mustard on it," Hugh agreed. "This is going to please Johnnie, Hilda. He can't help

eing impressed by the way Harold has thrown himself eart and soul into this British Honduras project. Still, see your point of view as a mother. Harold undoubtedly s a bit young to start on his own, and I think you're wise o go out after him without losing a moment. Now, are ou ready, because I think we ought to be getting back ? 'here's a nip in the air already, and the mare will be chilly she stands much longer. I wouldn't have brought you n here, but I thought it would relieve your mind to now exactly where Harold was."

"But I don't know where Harold is," the bereft mother mented.

"Oh, come, that's taking rather too gloomy a view of ne matter. You know he's safely on board a ship, the aptain of which is a good friend of Higginbotham's father. 'hat seems to me very reassuring; and, as I said, I nouldn't be at all surprised if the boat which sails next Vednesday doesn't arrive at Belize before Harold does."

"It's so unlike Harold to do anything so inconsiderate s this," said Hilda. "He has always been such a noughtful little boy."

"Oh, I don't think you can blame Harold. Exploring in the blood. Anything that's in the blood will out ooner or later, won't it, Mrs. Pringle ? Even if it's only boil. You couldn't expect Harold not to take advantage a chance like this. Of course, if I'd known it would orry you so much, I wouldn't have done all I could to ncourage this friendship with Higginbotham. But I nought it would be such a splendid thing for Harold ter on. I pictured him and Higginbotham stripped to ne waist and cutting down great trees of mahogany gether like a couple of sun-dried Gladstones. There's oo much talk about decadence nowadays. There's no eed to worry about the White Man's Burden when we ave Harolds in the younger generation. And what I ked was the practical way in which he remembered to bring his mushrooms and leave them on the kitchen table fore he went rolling down to Rio. That shows his head

is screwed on the right way. But come along, Hilda while we're singing Harold's praises the mare is gettin chilly."

"I think I should like to telegraph to Mrs. Higgi botham," she insisted.

"To-morrow, Hilda. You can't get an answer to-nigh and if you could, you wouldn't be able to do anythin about it. However, if you like to write out a telegram the good lady . . ."

"But I don't remember her address."

"There you are," said Hugh kindly. "You see Fate against your telegraphing to her to-night. And it's n good fighting against fortune, is it, Mrs. Pringle? Yo line, Hilda, is to go up to London to-morrow and boo your passage in this steamer. What's it called? *T Queen of the Caribbean.* Heave-ho, my hearties, and a that sort of thing. You'll want a pith helmet and mosquito-net. I tell you what you might do, thoug You might cable to Sydney Ricketts, Harold's futu partner, and ask him to keep an eye on Harold till yo arrive. It wouldn't do if the boy started off on the coc tail habit at his age. Still, I shouldn't think Higgi botham's father would encourage that, especially wh he sees what a size his son is already. He'll keep the both on lime-juice for a bit, I fancy. The more I thin about it, Hilda, the more certain I feel that Harold h done the best thing possible by setting off like this British Honduras on his own. He would never ha persuaded you to let him go, and I see the finger providence in this."

Hilda was still suffering so acutely from the shock Harold's escapade that she could not argue any mo with her brother. She let him lead her out to the waiti dog-cart without another word.

In the doorway of the snuggery, when Hilda had pass on ahead, Hugh stopped for a moment to wink at M Pringle, who indicated to him with a gesture that s considered him past praying for.

"It was a bit of luck our getting definite news of Harold like that," said Hugh to his sister as the mare leapt forward on the way home.

"Yes, but if that woman had only sent word of what he had done, we might have been in time to save Harold from this mad adventure," said Hilda wearily.

"Adventure, yes. That is the right word. But not mad," said Hugh. "I think Harold has shown a splendid readiness to seize the opportunity. My opinion of Harold has gone up tremendously. He's the true Viking breed—a kind of berserker Baedeker. Three cheers for Harold, say I." And Hugh began to hum to himself Hearts of Oak.

The news of Harold's escapade was received at Ambles with less enthusiasm than it should have been. Bertram was obviously jealous, and Viola was loyally anxious not to add to his mortification by yielding a sign of admiration for their cousin's feat. It was the very way that, after his behaviour at Ambles, Higginbotham might have been expected to behave; but that did not make his choice of Harold for his partner any less bitter. It was clear that he and Harold must have planned the whole business out during their expeditions up the river in the canoe. No wonder they had taken to exchanging embarrassed secretive glances when Bertram had surprised one of their colloquies. No wonder they had avoided with what must have been a contemptuous sneer Bertram's proposal to enact the death of Captain Cook in the Sandwich Islands. They would all the while have been feeling such a pair of potential Captain Cooks themselves that the notion of merely pretending to take part in any nautical drama would have struck them as laughable. Bertram flushed at the thought of his own humiliation. Yet, even in his disappointment he had to pay an unwilling respect to Harold's capacity for keeping a secret. Nobody during these last few days could have dreamed that he stood upon the verge of such a tremendous adventure. Not for one instant had he run the risk of rousing even a momentary

suspicion of his intentions. He had not even made any arrangements for the feeding of the inmates of his aquarium when he was gone.

Another who was not actually pleased by the news of Harold was Laurence. He had assisted late that afternoon at the dragging of the river for Harold's body, which Farmer Willett and some of his hands had begun with so much lugubrious joviality as to fire Laurence with the ambition, when they failed to recover anything except two old boots, an enamelled slop-pail, and a decayed eel-trap, to see if with the help of the spirits he could not ascertain the whereabouts of Harold in the next world and the road he had taken to reach it.

"Far be it from me, Hilda, not to rejoice that we seem to have definite news of nephew Harold," he said. "I only hope it may turn out to be accurate. At the same time, I think I ought to tell you that all day I have been the prey of an unusually profound presentiment that everything is not well with the little lad. I was indeed going to suggest that we should take advantage of the really exceptional responsiveness of the mahogany table in James's late room to indulge in a séance to-night and try to ascertain where the little wanderer has got to."

"A capital idea, Laurence," said Hugh, who saw no reason why the mahogany table should not play the same part as Mrs. Pringle in fixing Harold's whereabouts. "I'm strongly in favour of a séance immediately after supper."

"The only thing is," Laurence went on, "it would be advisable to call in the younger members of our party to assist at it. They will be helpful in the peculiar circumstances, I fancy."

"No, dear, please," Edith put in anxiously. "I really rather little Frida did not take part in anything like this."

"There will be nothing to upset Frida, my love," said her husband. "She will but form one of a chain round the table, and I attach some importance to her presence

Harold was always fond of Frida, and she is likely to be extremely useful in enabling us to get in touch with him."

"But, really, dear," Edith began again, only to be cut short by the kindly firmness of her husband's voice.

"I think I must be allowed to be the best judge on this occasion of what is or what is not desirable for Frida. We have set ourselves a definite task, Edith, this evening, and that is by hook *or* by crook to establish communication with the missing boy. I trust and hope that he may still be in this world; but, if by chance he is no longer with us, it would I think be more than inconsiderate to allow poor Hilda to go bundling off on what would be nothing better than a wild-goose chase to British Honduras. British Honduras is a long way from here. The fare is a heavy one. There are a hundred good reasons why kind Hilda should be spared from going if by some unhappy chance her presence there should no longer serve any useful purpose. Come, Edith, it is not like you to be egotistical. And I'm sure, when I tell you that I require our little Frideswide's assistance, you will see the propriety of not putting difficulties in the way."

Frida, of course, was not present when her fitness to take part in the séance was being discussed by her parents.

"Well," said Edith finally, "if you insist, Laurence, you must have your own way; but I will not be held responsible for the effect it may have on Frida, who is already in a very nervous and overwrought state."

"Nothing will happen to Frida," her father intoned. 'She is but a link in a chain—an important link perhaps in this instance—but still only a link. There is no need to mention the word 'ghosts' to the child. There will be no advantage to the experiment in stringing her up to a condition of unnecessary expectancy."

"And do you want me to take part in this business?" Edith asked.

"My dear, I want us all to take part in it. We are going to try to get into communication with the wandering

Harold. He may at this moment be dancing a merry hornpipe with his friend Higginbotham on the briny deep. He may not be. That is the object of calling to our aid those methods of communication with which during the last few weeks I have made myself thoroughly familiar."

"You don't think it is tempting providence?" his wife asked solemnly.

"Who are we, my dear, to tempt providence? I have nowadays a somewhat larger notion of providence. I do not regard Providence as a Being with little else to occupy Him than thwarting the curiosity of mankind as a nurse thwarts the curiosity of her young charge. Yes, Edith, nowadays I breathe an ampler air. I am not cribb'd, cabin'd and confin'd within the narrow walls of a sectarian creed."

"And are the servants to be invited to take part in this séance?" his wife pressed.

"No, my dear. This is not a piece of old-fashioned homely merry-making like Snapdragon. We do not want to approach this solemn business in the spirit of a Christmas entertainment."

Edith made an attempt to get Hilda to say that she would have nothing to do with the séance; but whether the shock of hearing that Harold had eloped to British Honduras with Higginbotham had temporarily deranged Hilda's usually practical mind or not, she declined to interfere with Laurence's plans.

"We may hear something about poor little Harold's whereabouts," she sighed fondly.

"Well, I just wanted to warn you, Hilda," said her sister, speaking with unusual firmness, "that I wash my hands of the whole business, and that I am only allowing Frida to take part in it out of deference to Laurence, though I think that on this occasion he is wrong."

In spite of Edith's efforts to keep from her daughter the object of their all sitting round the mahogany table in James's library, and that in the dark, she found that her daughter was confidently expecting a vision of Harold.

ghost before they sat down at all. She was indeed trembling so violently as to draw from her father an almost irritable injunction to sit quiet and not shake the table.

"Come now," said Laurence, closing his eyes and speaking in the voice with which in days of yore he was wont to give the final Benediction, "let us create a circle. Frida let the little finger of your left hand lightly touch the little finger of my right hand, and do not indulge in those convulsive movements or you will break the current. Edith, if you think your presence on the other side of Frida will have a tranquillizing effect, will you join the little finger of your left hand to the little finger of Frida's right. Hilda, I should like you on my left hand. Then Viola, then Hugh, and let Bertram form the link between Hugh and Edith. I am sorry that George will not condescend to take part in our little experiment. But so be it. Unless he joins us readily, it were better for him not to come at all. One hostile influence will suffice to break the current. Hugo, before you take your place, perhaps you will be good enough to turn down the lamps, and at the same time draw the curtains from the window. Do I see Beyle asleep in his basket? He should not be here, I think. If, as I expect it will, this excellent table responds to our influence, we do not want to be hampered by a tactless bow-wow from Beyle at the critical moment. Now, listen everybody, should the table begin to sway, do not attempt to bring pressure to bear upon it. Let your hands remain lightly on the surface, and be prepared to rise all together should the table evince a desire to leave the floor."

"Boo-hoo!" Frida sobbed at this moment.

"Frideswide, Frideswide," said her father reproachfully, "do not work yourself up. This is not showing yourself father's little maid. I am not frightening myself beforehand. You were just as nervous, don't you remember, when I set out to teach you swimming. And consequently you always swallowed many unnecessary mouthfuls of water. Don't you remember, Frida?"

"Yes, father," she sobbed.

"Very well then, apply your experience now. Think if you require something to strengthen your weak huma will, think of your poor lost cousin and remember that b keeping yourself under control you may be able to hel him and comfort his anxious relatives."

Frida choked back her sobs; and for ten minutes th company sat in the dim silence of the library, their finge resting lightly upon the mahogany table. Then Bertra happened to catch Viola's eye just as they were bot gazing at the sublimely idiotic expression on th countenance of their uncle.

"Ah, steady, all of you. The table is beginning t quiver," Laurence warned the company in a voice mystery.

What was making it quiver, however, was not th advent of any members of the spiritual world, but th suppressed giggles of Bertram and Viola, which at las became so uncontrollable that both children slid fro their seats on to the floor and remained there rolling abou in helpless laughter.

"I shall have to ask Bertram and Viola to leave th room if they cannot behave themselves," said Laurenc sternly. "They have now broken the current, and w shall have to begin to concentrate all over again. It saddening to find little children behaving as irresponsibl as the apes of the jungle which know no better."

Bertram and Viola, who were sincerely anxious not t be sent off to bed, managed to pull themselves together and for another quarter of an hour they sat silent unt Bertram, whose nose had begun to tickle, sneezed s loudly and so suddenly that Frida yelled in affright, an thereby once again broke the current.

"Don't you think you had better give up for to-night ? Edith asked earnestly.

"Give up ?" her husband repeated, with a seve smile. "My dear Edith, I have sometimes sat for thr and four and even five hours, possessing my soul in patienc

Come, come, do not faint by the wayside. Come, come, let us concentrate once again upon the lost Harold with all our faculties."

Ten minutes later there was a loud rap from Hugh's end of the table.

"What have we here?" Laurence intoned. "Who is that?"

Rap! Rap! Rap!

"Promising. Very promising," he murmured. "Who are you, spirit? Do you wish to communicate with us?"

Rap!

"So be it. I will repeat the letters of the alphabet. Will you signify by an answering rap your name? Then in a kind of chant he began: "A? B? C? D? E? F? G? H? . . ."

Rap!

"This is indeed more than promising. A?"

Rap!

"So far then we have reached HA. It looks very much as if our wanderer were going to communicate with us eftsoons."

Laurence began to go through the alphabet again; but he had not reached as far as the letter R when there was a queer moaning sound that seemed to come from the lawn outside the window.

He stopped portentously.

"I wonder," he whispered in awe-struck tones, "if the dream of my life is to be granted and I am about to effect the materialization of a spirit. Come, spirit," he cried with authority, "I conjure thee to stand forth in our midst."

Several screams have occurred during this tale at moments when the characters of it have been in some stress of mind or body. Their united volume was nothing compared to the shriek Frida suddenly let out at this moment, as she sat with horrified eyes staring at the uncurtained window. Her shriek was taken up by Hilda,

and then by Edith, and finally by Viola ere she retire under the table followed by her brother. Even Laurenc looked aghast at the sight vouchsafed to his own necrc mancy, for there, outside the window, was the shape c Harold, white as a ghost in an aura of unearthly light In fact, Laurence was so frightened that he seemed o the verge of following Bertram and Viola underneat the table.

"Take him away, mother, take him away," Frida yelled "He's coming into the room. He's banging on th window to come in."

And, indeed, the ghostly Harold without seemed deter mined to reach the family circle into which, by the ras procedure of his uncle, he had been conjured. Yet, whe Hugh hurried out of the library on to the lawn, the ghos fled as if it were more frightened of Hugh than Hugh of i Two or three minutes later there was a surge of terrifie feet from the direction of the kitchen, as Mrs. Smith Jane, Ethel, William, Pobjoy and Mrs. Huggins, who ha looked in for a few minutes after supper, rushed helter skelter into the front hall, crying that the ghost of Harol was coming after them.

"Laurence, I think it's really wicked of you to meddl with the unseen world like this," his wife turned on hir to cry with anguish, for the wretched Frida was no lying on her back and drumming with her legs on the floc in a paroxysm of terror.

And then the ghost itself, carrying a lantern covered wit cobwebs, appeared in their midst to denounce the autho of his wrongs.

"Mother, mother, uncle Hugh shut me up in the water mill, and he took my glasses, and I got all over flou trying to get out, and I haven't had anything to eat fc supper, and I found a lantern, and uncle Hugh came ou to try and catch me again, and he took my mushroom I picked and shut me up in the water-mill, and nobod could hear me shouting to be let out, because the wate made such a noise."

"So this is your British Honduras, Hugh?" his sister issed, as she confronted him, almost as white with rage s her son was white with flour.

And all that she could wring from Hugh's ineffable oolness was:

"Well, thank goodness, the séance is over, and I can ght a cigarette."

CHAPTER XV

THE GOLD RUSH

"QUITE a useful clearance," Hugh observed to Georg on the day after Harold's ordeal by flour an water.

This was the cynical way in which he referred to th departure from Ambles of Hilda, Harold, Edith an Frida that afternoon. Hilda had gone to London, whe she intended to wait for John, and as soon as he lande from the Atlantic tell him all about the disgracefu behaviour of their youngest brother.

"There are some things which exceed the limit," sh said to Hugh before leaving.

"I know. Motor cars are among them," he laughed

"It's the cowardice of your behaviour I so despise, Hilda continued wrathfully, "the sheer unadulterate cowardice of stalking poor little Harold down when h was quietly engaged in picking mushrooms for us all t enjoy, luring him to that awful mill, and then taking h glasses from him so that he couldn't see the way to g out. You may thank your own good fortune that in h distracted state he did not fling himself headlong out a window into the mill-pond. You might have had t face a charge of murder. And you hadn't even the gra to use open violence. Ugh! It makes me sick to thin of you tempting the poor child with nougat to make hi follow you."

"Yes, and it very nearly made me sick to be able t

empt him with nougat at that hour of the morning," ugh agreed warmly.

"And then to leave him there either to go mad with ight or perhaps be devoured alive by rats! The more think of your behaviour, the more appalling it seems me. Why, it's absolutely medieval in its barbarity," ilda exclaimed. "However, we shall soon see what ohn thinks of it."

Hugh yawned.

"I'm afraid, Hilda, I cannot pay quite as much atten- on to your indignation as I should like; but, really, I as up so early this morning that I'm beginning to feel ncommonly sleepy"

"And to think of your taking Harold's mushrooms way from him like that and wolfing them down at reakfast . . ."

"Well, you had a jolly good whack at them yourself," ugh interrupted.

"But I didn't know Harold was shut up in a mill with lot of sacks of flour."

"It would have been a pity to waste the mushrooms. arold couldn't have eaten them raw. I left him the ugat."

"Without any water to drink after it. And you might ave known he would feel sick after eating such a rich eet. However, I'm not going to let the matter rest re. I give you fair warning that I shall take legal tion. I am going to consult John's solicitors about it. shall make it perfectly clear that I do not consider arold's life safe while you are at Ambles."

"By the way, what arrangements has Harold made out feeding the creatures in his aquarium when he es to London?"

"That is Harold's business."

"Yes, but I don't want to have my heart wrung by e groans of starving newts and the wails of emaciated icklebacks."

"You are very sensitive to the feelings of newts and

sticklebacks; but you were deaf to your own nephew cries when he was immured in that dreadful mi However, don't bother yourself about the aquariun Mrs. Smith is going to look after the inmates."

Hugh shook his head.

"You'll have the Society for the Prevention of Cruel to Animals on your track, Hilda. Of course, she ma cater more successfully for newts than she does for huma beings; but it's taking a big risk."

Hilda snorted scornfully, but he was unabashed.

"It's no use your trumpeting at me like a rogue elephan Hilda. I'm serious about this. Just imagine what tho unhappy newts will feel like when Mrs. Smith cooks son carrots for them like those we had at lunch. Well, here the dog-cart. I hope you'll have a pleasant journe Hullo, here's Harold. Good-bye, Harold. Give my lo to Higginbotham when you see him."

"I'm not going to see him," Harold replied, his li pouting grimly. "And I'm not going to say good-b to you, because you shut me up in the mill, and you to my glasses away from me so that I couldn't see to g out."

"Well, remember what King John wanted to do to h nephew, poor little Arthur, and think yourself lucky was only your glasses," Hugh laughed.

"The brutal callousness of you, Hugh, is beyond an thing I ever heard," his sister flung as him as she mount the dog-cart.

"Ching-a-ling," he said as he turned back into the hous

Edith had not taken Frida to London. Her daughte shaken nerves required the soothing climate of Ventn to recover from the shock of Harold's materialization the séance. It had been useless for Laurence to arg that she was encouraging Frida to be hysterical. Edith mother-love had risen superior to anything her husba could say.

"I disapprove *in toto* of your course of action," he to her.

"I can't help it, Laurence. I am not going to have Frida's mental breakdown upon my conscience."

"She will have to face the supernatural some time or other. It will inevitably impinge upon her sooner or later."

"There was nothing supernatural about last night's business. The child was nearly frightened into a fit by what happened. She was moaning in my arms all night long. I am sorry, Laurence, to disagree with you for the first time in our happy and united married life, but I consider it necessary for Frida's health to go away from this house. She has been unable for some time now even to get my shoes out of the wardrobe without rushing away from it with a shudder and crying out there is something inside waiting to pounce upon her. That is not a healthy state of mind for a little girl of her age. We should neither of us forgive ourselves if the poor little thing became an idiot, and I will not vouch for her sanity if she stays here. I do not want to dissuade you from what you think is right; but I cannot help praying, Laurence, that you will give up this attempt to pierce the veil."

This long speech of Edith's was the nearest Laurence had ever come to listening to a sermon since he had ceased to be a curate; and it may have impressed him more deeply than he had been willing to admit at the time. About a week after his wife and daughter had gone to seek bodily and mental refreshment on the Undercliff at Ventnor, he received a letter from a kinsman offering him a living in the north of England.

"There is something a little tempting," he said to Hugh at breakfast on the morning this offer came, "something more than a little tempting in this opportunity to sow the good seed among the stony places of the Yorkshire dales. My Diocesan, too, would be a man of liberal sympathies and unlikely to press with undue harshness on one who, like myself, is more jealous of the spirit of Christianity than of its letter. My work during the last

few months has been arduous, Hugo, exceeding arduous I am inclined to trow I require the tonic atmosphere o the Yorkshire dales after the feats of mental concentratio to which I have subjected myself recently."

"How much is the living worth?" Hugh asked.

"How much is the living worth? Let me see. It i not a bad living. Eight hundred a year nett, and a Rector of some attractions. In these days that is almost a exceptionally good living."

"Yes, I should think it would brace you up quite lot," Hugh said. "You're not thinking of turning dow an offer like that, are you?"

"I had not actually considered it one way or the othe There are so many considerations, my dear fellow, whic a minister of religion is called upon to—ah—conside before he can accept or refuse a call like this. You ma or may not know that during the last year I have passe through a period of much spiritual stress."

"I knew you chucked your last living. But that wa a very poor one, wasn't it?"

"Forgive me, Hugh, if I venture to remind you tha the question of—ah—finance does not enter into th consideration of a living's merits. We are content wit any living, provided we have an assurance that we ar doing the best with it of which we are capable. I was no doing my best with Newton Candover. It is not possibl for a clergyman to give of his best when he is tossed upo the sea of doubt. Yes, my dear Hugh, like others befor me, I doubted. I was choking in the dust created by th march of modern science. I found myself less and les able to reconcile my reason with much of the dogm which has so unhappily supplanted doctrine. Mad dogm I have more than once called it in a lighter mood. Possibl I doubted too much. I am in troth somewhat incline to extremes. I preached what the Bishop of Silcheste characterized as a modernist sermon on the Virgin Birth He used words to me in a letter which I considered in compatible with the finest traditions of his episcop

ffice. I retorted, Hugh, perhaps a little sharply, a little oo sharply I am now fain to think. Before I was aware f it, the Bishop and I were at grips, if I may so describe t, over the Trinity. Meanwhile, in my desire to express nyself more fully than I could ever hope to do in a long ontroversial correspondence, I conceived the notion of vriting my play *Thomas*, taking as my subject the in-redulous apostle. From Thomas I turned to Paul, rom Paul to Peter. However, I must not bore you Hugh, with the details of my spiritual Odyssey. You vill, I know, be glad to learn that I am now more at peace han I have been for many a long and weary week. The ffer this morning of this benefice seems to me a clear oken of the Divine favour. Bruised as I am by the long attle I have fought on behalf of sincerity absolute, I ecognize in this Yorkshire parish the road by which I nay step back into that state of life to which it pleased lmighty God to call me. Yes, Hugh, my mind is made p. I will take the opportunity of dear Edith and little rida recuperating down at balmy Ventnor to explore vhat may prove to be the most fruitful field of my labours et. Who knows? It lies with an all-merciful Provi-ence. Come, Hugo lad, you are letting your coffee grow old. May I trouble you to pass me those excellent-ooking kidneys?"

Hugh roused himself with a start from the day-dream nto which his brother-in-law's breakfast-table discourse ad plunged him.

"I think you're perfectly right, Lorenzo. In my pinion you're wasting your time at Ambles."

"You think so, Hugo? I wouldn't go quite so far s saying that. I have added something, I fancy, to our nowledge of the other world. Not so much as I hoped. ut that is as it should be. We can ill afford to be com-lacent in this our mortal life. And so you advise me to ird up my loins and sally forth Yorkshirewards?"

"It's a good living. I call eight hundred a year a lly good living."

"Naturally that would be the last consideration weigh with me; but undoubtedly, as with your practic mind you so clearly perceive, it is a good living. To m however, the prospect of fresh woods and pastures ne for my Master's work appeals more than anything. *L reste*, I think the honest Yorkshire air will bring back th roses to my little Frida's cheeks. She will run free ther free as a colt. Dear Edith, too, will rejoice in the oppo tunity to devote herself once again to the duties of a paris After breakfast, Hugh, I shall confront the problem unravelling the Yorkshire trains in Bradshaw. I ma be mistaken, but I fancy we shall find that the venerab old Minster city of York will prove as usual the nod of the connection with Upper Langdale-cum-Trotb which I hardly anticipate will be within reach of a station on the main line."

The very next day Laurence set out to inspect t parish he had been offered. Three days later he wro to tell Hugh that he had accepted it *core jucundo*, a intended to give himself the brief rest he so much need while Edith went into the problem of removing the furniture from Ambles.

Edith left Frida in charge of a kindly landlady Ventnor, for though her heart was overflowing with pio gratitude to the Divine mercy, she did not think it wou be safe to remind Frida of the shock she had suffered bringing her back to Ambles.

"Well, George, old man," said Hugh to his broth "it looks as if things were beginning to go our way last. As soon as Edith has cleared out with all her st I shall go into the question of estimates. By the wa what about Bertram and Viola going to boarding-schoo If we get the house full of builders, my time will be t much taken up to give them any lessons."

"I can't settle anything till the flat-race season over," George laid down as his final word.

"Well, I don't mind their being down here, so long you don't expect me to give them regular lessons. As

matter of fact we shall find them rather useful, because as far as I can make out all the indoor servants are leaving. Still, if the worst comes to the worst, we might be able to board with Mrs. Huggins. Not a word from Hilda. I fancy she's going to try to starve us out. When I heard Johnnie wasn't coming back for another month, I was afraid she'd turn up again here; but she evidently thinks we can't hold out by ourselves. Any news from Eleanor?"

"Eleanor's all right," George replied. "She's very busy making arrangements for touring companies of this play of James's. I expect she's forgotten about the children. But don't worry about their lessons, Hugh. I think we make too much fuss about children's education. For all the good my schooling did me I might never have had any at all."

It was true Hilda had heard with grim satisfaction from Mrs. Smith that she and the two girls were leaving when the month was up. It was true she was picturing with a great deal of pleasure the discomfort of life for everybody at Ambles without her housewifely presence. But she was not contemplating ever returning there herself. She was, in fact, contemplating doing of her own accord what Hugh had plotted to trick her into doing. She was contemplating residence in British Honduras.

When Hilda, in a condition of wrath and agitation, had visited the offices of Messrs. White, Howard, Hunter, Howard and Kemp, in Lamb's Conduit Street, and given them an opportunity to charge John three and fourpence for attending her at the telephone to make an appointment, and six and eightpence on top of that for attending her at that appointment in the person of Mr. Howard Senior, she little thought she was going to meet her fate that morning.

Yet so it was. While our Mr. Howard Senior was listening with an air of paternal courtesy to her indictment of Hugh, our Mr. Howard Junior, in another room, was attending Mr. Sydney Ricketts, who had just reached

England from British Honduras, and was anxious to be put into communication at once with John Touchwood.

"Won't be back for a month, eh? That's rather a nuisance," said Mr. Ricketts. "I wanted to see him about this two thousand he's invested in my concession out there."

"I see," said our Mr. Howard Junior.

"It practically makes him half owner of it."

"I see."

"And I was wondering what he'd take to buy him out?"

"I see," said our Mr. Howard Junior once more, and this time he put in his eyeglass and stared very intently at Mr. Ricketts with his unencumbered eye. There was a faint, a very faint, but still a quite definite perfume of litigation in the air. It was clear to the unencumbered eye of our Mr. Howard Junior that Mr. Ricketts was anxious to get back the full ownership of his concession.

"What would you offer?" our Mr. Howard Junior rapped out suddenly.

Mr. Ricketts scratched his long, sunburnt, sinewy neck with a meditative forefinger.

"Oh, I hadn't thought of anything like a definite offer at present," he said prudently. "It just occurred to me that as this brother of his hadn't cottoned to the notion of mahogany and logwood he might have no further interest in the concession."

"I see," said our Mr. Howard Junior even once more.

And, while Mr. Ricketts continued to fiddle with his neck, he took up the cautious tune by drumming with his beautifully manicured left hand on the desk.

"But the position is now rather different," he explained. "It is true that Mr. Hugh Touchwood has declined to take advantage of his brother's offer; but that offer has been extended to Mr. John Touchwood's sister, Mrs. Curtis, on behalf of her son Harold, so that any offer you wish to make would have to be approved by her."

"I see," said Mr. Ricketts, and our Mr. Howard Junior

looked annoyed at the way his own verb had been poached from him. He fell back on an adverb.

"Precisely," he said.

"Just so," Mr. Ricketts answered.

"Exactly," said our Mr. Howard Junior. "However, as your business is not at all urgent, I will not suggest your meeting Mrs. Curtis, although, as a matter of fact, she happens to be at this moment in our office."

"She is?"

A stranger would have been justified in wondering what was the meaning of that wistful expression in Mr. Rickett's eyes as they roamed among the dusty files and tin cases on the shelves of this office. A friend of his would have told you at once that Syd was looking for the glint of glass in that legal desert, for this was one of the moments when Syd relied on the inspiration of a brandy and soda, though a whisky or even a gin would have been better than red tape. In all that waste he found nothing more like a decanter than the monocle of our Mr. Howard Junior.

"Well, perhaps it might be as well if I took this chance of making her acquaintance," he said.

"Of course, you will understand that as her solicitor I shall advise Mrs. Curtis to do nothing without consulting us first?" our Mr. Howard Junior asked, with his hand upon the telephone.

"Oh, quite, quite," Mr. Ricketts agreed in a parched voice.

Our Mr. Howard Junior took up the receiver.

"Will you put me through to Mr. Howard Senior, please."

Hilda had just finished her denunciation of Hugh in the morocco-bound room of Mr. Howard Senior, and he was now sitting back in his chair regarding her with an expression of the utmost benignity through a pair of gold-rimmed pince-nez.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Curtis," he begged, as he picked up the receiver.

"Ah, yes, Cazenove, is that you? Oh, indeed? With you now? Indeed! One moment, Cazenove."

He put a plump hand over the receiver.

"Mr. Sydney Ricketts, your son's future partner, is at this moment with my son, Mrs. Curtis. And it has been suggested that you might care to meet him. I gather he wishes to discuss a business proposition. Naturally you will take no steps without previously consulting us. We know very little of this gentleman. What shall I say?"

"Oh, I shall be quite glad to meet him," replied Hilda.

"Mrs. Curtis will be glad to meet you," our Mr. Howard Junior informed Mr. Ricketts, whose throat was so dry by now that he could only nod mutely his acknowledgment of this communication.

The introduction took place under the beaming patronage of our Mr. Howard Senior; and Mr. Sydney Ricketts somehow managed to mutter an invitation to come and have a spot of lunch, which was the quickest way he could think of to obtain that drink, of which by now he stood in dire need.

"I have my little boy with me."

"That's all right, bring him along."

Harold was in the outer office gazing with voracious curiosity at the clerical work of the office-boy, who had been so much embarrassed by those merciless glasses that he had twice sucked the nib of his pen dry in an effort to concentrate upon the letter he was writing.

"Harold, this is Mr. Ricketts."

"Mr. Ricketts from British Honduras?" Harold asked intelligently.

"That's right, sonny. I want you and your mother to come and have a spot of lunch with me."

"All right, let's," Harold agreed.

"Nice friendly kiddie," Mr. Ricketts observed as he hailed a cab, and told the driver to go as fast as he could to the Holborn Restaurant.

Hilda smiled gratefully.

'Three dry martinis," Mr. Ricketts ordered before the

had pulled their chairs into the table. When Hilda refused the two for herself and Harold, he tried to look disappointed and drank them quickly himself.

It might be interesting to speculate why Hilda's personality should particularly affect men who had come under the spell of tropical America. Daniel Curtis, who had devoted twenty of his bachelor years to investigating the wild life of the Orinoco basin, who had written the most moving and at the same time the most accurate account of the habits of the great bird-eating spiders of the Amazon, who for so long had depended upon the companionship of howler monkeys, toucans, and tanagers, and who had been intending to explore Yucatan when his career was cut short by some jealous Indians because they had fancied he was making sheep's-eyes at their women through the very powerful spectacles he habitually wore, Daniel Curtis, the famous naturalist, had fallen a victim to Hilda's not too obvious charm. And now here was Sydney Ricketts, who had spent his bachelor years acquiring mahogany and logwood up the Moho river in British Honduras, who was sun-dried like a leaf of tobacco and pickled in spirit like a museum reptile, who esteemed the squareness of a gin-bottle above the slimness of a feminine waist, who on his rare visits to England had never once contemplated sport with Amaryllis in the welcome shade, here was Sydney Ricketts falling a victim to what was nowadays Hilda's even less obvious charm.

It was true that these products of tropical America did bring out whatever faint attractiveness Hilda possessed. She seemed to react to them as a tasteless dish reacts to the addition of spice. It may be, too, that in the case of Mr. Ricketts the prospect of marriage had material advantages to offer. Indeed, when one remembers that marriage with Hilda would involve a vicarious paternity of Harold, it seems impossible to disregard the likelihood of an ulterior motive. Yet it would neither be fair to Hilda nor to her suitor to lay too much stress on the fact that his property in British Honduras had suddenly become many times as

valuable as when he parted with a half share in it to John Touchwood for two thousand pounds. Several times in the chequered history of that colony veins of auriferous quartz had been discovered; but there had never before been evidence of gold in sufficient quantity to offer prospects of successful working. Two months ago, however, on the concession of Sydney Ricketts gold had been discovered in such richness as to make the existence of a partner nothing short of a nuisance. With the prospect of unlimited wealth before him, it was only natural that Mr Ricketts should want more. So he had come to England at the first opportunity in order to buy John Touchwood out. An astute solicitor like our Mr. Howard Junior had not needed an eyeglass to perceive this, and Mr. Sydney Ricketts had not needed to be told by that eyeglass that he did perceive it. He saw at once that any offer he might make to buy out his sleeping partner was unlikely to be accepted until his reason for making it had been completely investigated. When he heard at lunch in the Holborn Restaurant that Harold was to be his future partner and that Harold's mother as his guardian was the only person with whom he could make a practical deal, he knew from his conversation in the office of Messrs. White Howard, Hunter, Howard, and Kemp that unless he heart could be won over to his side he would stand no more chance than he would stand with John Touchwood.

Before he had finished his third double whisky and soda Sydney Ricketts had asked himself whether after all the simplest way out of the matter might not be to marry Hilda. That would keep the property in the family. He ordered a fourth whisky and soda and surveyed his prospective mate across the table. The sallowness of her complexion after the complexions of the half-castes with whom so much of his life had been spent did not strike him as excessive. He liked too the practical way in which she chose what she wanted to eat. That augured well for her housekeeping. She did not flutter helplessly with the bill of fare and ask him to choose for her, as he with

bachelor's disgust had often seen women flutter in restaurants. He had met so few little boys of twelve that he did not suppose Harold in the least extraordinary. It never struck him that all little boys were not like this; and by the time he had swallowed a fifth whisky and soda, he had become enough of a victim to the charms of Hilda and Harold to suggest a visit to the British Museum after lunch. In that vast and gloomy repository of human handiwork Mr. Ricketts drew for Hilda a pleasant picture of life in British Honduras, of refuge from the heat in the coolness of the Cockscomb Mountains, and of regattas in the harbour of Belize. And while he talked Harold darted from case to case, bright and tireless as a bluebottle in a butcher's shop.

The visit to the British Museum was followed by a visit to the Zoo where Harold, remembering a triumph his cousin Bertram had once enjoyed in persuading the giraffe to lick a proffered hand, tried to persuade the shy and gentle creature to lick his hand. But the giraffe remained as indifferent as a factory chimney to Harold's coaxing murmurs; and when he suddenly thrust that hand through the railings to grab the tall beast's velvety muzzle, it made a stilted escape at some speed to the far end of the enclosure.

"You shouldn't have frightened the poor creature like that," said one of those interfering old ladies who frequent places like the Zoo.

"I didn't frighten the giraffe, did I, Mr. Ricketts?" Harold asked.

"Not on your life, sonny," said Mr. Ricketts. "You tell the old dame to mind her own business."

Hilda smiled warmly at Mr. Ricketts. His championship of Harold was sweeter to her ears than an Abyssinian maid singing of Mount Abora to the accompaniment of a dulcimer. As for the old dame, she shook her bonnet crossly and flung a defiant piece of stale bread into the enclosure to console the timid giraffe.

During the days that followed, Mr. Sydney Ricketts escorted Hilda and her son to all the places in London

so well known except to Londoners. He took them to matinées of wholesome plays, for at that date it was possible to get a drink between the acts. And then about a fortnight after he had first met them he took them out to Balham to see his mother.

"There have been a lot of changes in Balham since I was the age of sonny here," he told Hilda when they turned into Lyonesse Road. "For one thing, they've altered all the lamp-posts in our street."

The visitors must have made a favourable impression on old Mrs. Ricketts, for two days later in the Whale Room at the Natural History Museum, Mr. Ricketts proposed to Hilda.

Those who know it will remember that the Whale Room is always strangely silent and empty, because people who go downstairs to visit it are unable to stand the curiously individual and unpleasant odour by which it is permeated and seldom stay there long enough to appreciate the fine points of difference between the porpoise and the dolphin. Had Mr. Ricketts spent anxious hours in trying to select a spot where the response to his question was most likely to be favourable, he could not have found one.

A few minutes before they had been wandering round that gallery which is brightened by the cases that enshrine the Gould collection of humming-birds. Hilda, looking at those tiny wings that competed with the ruby, the sapphire, the emerald, and the amethyst, remembered her dead husband whose life had been cut short when he was still adding to his own collection of these airy jewels. She remembered how happy her all too brief time with Daniel Curtis had been. She felt that she had been prematurely robbed of wedded bliss—and that she deserved more from life than she had yet received. She did not allow herself to go so far as to envisage Mr. Sydney Ricketts as a second husband for herself, though it did flash through her mind what a splendid friend he would be for Harold, provided of course that he gradually took to drinking not quite so many strong whiskies and sodas. No doubt if he had

vi. . . . Hilda caught herself out and blushed. At that moment Harold, fired no doubt with a desire for contrast with the humming-birds, cried eagerly :

" Mother, do let us go down and see the Whale Room now. I do want to show Mr. Ricketts the Whale Room. I think he'd like to see the Whale Room. I do want to show him a bottle-nosed whale. Don't you think you'd like to see the Whale Room, Mr. Ricketts ? "

The sinews of Mr. Rickett's brick-coloured neck twanged a cheerful affirmative, and he and Hilda prepared to follow Harold, who was scampering down ahead of them into the bowels of the Natural History Museum like a homing rabbit.

" What a very unpleasant odour there is down here," said Hilda, taking out her handkerchief which was sprinkled alluringly with eau-de-Cologne and pressing it politely to her nose. " Really one doesn't like to say such a thing, but one might almost imagine some of those big fish had not been properly stuffed."

" They're not fish, mother," her son exclaimed, shocked by such ignorance. " They're mammals. Whales are mammals, aren't they, Mr. Ricketts ? "

" I wouldn't be surprised what they were, sonny," said Mr. Ricketts, whom the uncanny odour was reminding that he had not had a whisky and soda since lunch. " But they certainly smell very heavy. Don't they, Mrs. Curtis ? "

" Don't be long down here, Harold, there's a good boy," his mother called after him faintly, for he had hurried deeper into the room, oblivious of the smell and intent only upon discovering an example of the narwhal's horn.

" I'm trying to think what this smell reminds me of," Mr. Ricketts said. " Is it a cargo of vegetable ivory ? Or is it decayed rubber ? Or is it guano ? Yes, it's some manure or other," he concluded pensively.

" I really think we might go back and wait for Harold at the top of the stairs, Mr. Ricketts," Hilda suggested.

" Syd ! "

" I beg your pardon ? "

"Or Syddie my mother calls me."

"I don't quite understand."

"Call me Syd, and make me the happiest man alive," h
begged.

"But . . ."

"Call me Syd," he implored. "And let's get on upstai
out of this fish market and talk matters over."

"Very well . . . Syd," she murmured.

The Whale Room of the Natural History Museum is n
place for a woman to be coy and hesitating.

Harold, his brain bursting with information about th
cetacean assembly, and himself blowing like a diminuti
grampus, joined them some minutes later.

"I didn't know where you could have gone," he said.

"Thought we'd been swallowed like a couple of Jonah
eh?" Mr. Ricketts suggested.

"Harold dear," said his mother gently, "I want to t
you something."

"Not about whales," Harold insisted firmly. H
dreaded too much her ignorance on that subject to let h
expose it to the world.

"No, dear, it's about Mr. Ricketts. He is going to
your new father."

"But he can't be," exclaimed Harold, whose biolo
was offended by such a statement.

"Hush, dear. He's going to stand to you in the pla
of a father. I am going to marry him, and we are all goi
out to British Honduras together until you go to scho
at Rugborough next year. Are you glad?"

It was a rash question; but Hilda had confidence in h
son, and he did not betray it.

"Well, if you're going to have another husband, I
like you to have Mr. Ricketts; but he can't be my fath
But he can be my uncle if he likes."

"That's the style, sonny," said Mr. Ricketts cordial
"Uncle Syd, eh? The last fellow that called me un
Syd was a young Yank I touched for two hundred dolla
at poker on the last voyage but one out."

That evening at a little dinner-party to celebrate his betrothal, at which Hilda was persuaded to drink half a glass of champagne in honour of the occasion, Mr. Ricketts told her about the discovery of gold on his concession.

"You'll be a rich woman, Hil," he assured her. "And Sonny here will be a richer. I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't die a knight. Sir Harold Curtis. That sounds good to me."

"Would the King say to me, 'kneel down, Mr. Harold Curtis, and rise up Sir Harold Curtis?'" the candidate for royal favour asked.

"That's right."

"Well, I will be a knight, I think," he decided.

"You know, Hil, I was a bit shy of popping the question, because I was afraid you'd think I was after your money."

Hilda smiled at the thought of the small annual income she had inherited from her late husband.

"My money indeed."

"Well, if this gold pans out as I expect, you'll be a very rich woman on your own, because you're the half owner of it."

"Good gracious!" she cried suddenly.

"What's the matter?"

"My brother," she murmured. "That awful brother of mine I told you about, the one who tried to kidnap Harold."

"He took my glasses away from me so that I couldn't see to get out of the mill," Harold put in fiercely.

"Tough. Very tough," Mr. Ricketts commented, and he signalled to the waiter, for he wanted another bottle of champagne. "However, we'll soon settle this brother of yours, if he gets up to any more tricks like that."

"But you don't understand, Syd," said Hilda. "When he gave up his option on the partnership with you, he made me sign an agreement to share with him half and half of anything that might accrue from that two thousand pounds."

Mr. Ricketts whistled.

"That *is* tough. Why, he'll have a quarter of our . . here waiter! I won't have that bottle of champagn Bring me a large double brandy. No soda."

Mr. Ricketts said nothing until he had put this inspiratio away. Then he spoke solemnly and sternly.

"We must buy him out."

"If he will be bought out."

"He must be," Mr. Ricketts declared, banging his fi down on the table with such vigour that the head wait rushed up to ask if there had been anything the matt with the brandy.

"No, repeat the dose," Mr. Ricketts commanded.

"Yes, sare."

And the head waiter bustled off with as much importan as if he had been told to lead the charge of the Lig Brigade at Balaclava.

"You'll need to be very cautious, Syd," his futu wife warned him. "Hugh is extremely cunning, and I a sorry to have to add, though he is my brother, not at straight over money matters. If you offer to buy hi out, he'll be sure to suspect something."

"Leave him to me," said Sydney, who after the seco dose of that brandy felt perfectly able to deal with Hug "Leave him to me, Hil. I'm going to buy him ou And I'm going to buy him out cheap, what's more. Not penny more than one thousand pounds shall he get out me."

"I never wanted to sign that private agreement," s lamented. "I knew it would end in Hugh's getting t better of me."

"Hil," Sydney promised her solemnly, "he shall nev get the better of you. Don't forget he's got me to de with now. That's another pair of shoes. I haven't got trusting nature like you. I'm reckoned the finest hand poker in the Gulf of Mexico. Ask anybody if Syd Ricke won't rake in more chips with a pair of jacks than wh anybody else would with a straight flush. I'm season Hil, seasoned the same as my mahogany is."

Hilda was not as confident as her future husband of getting the better of Hugh. It seemed to her when she looked back into the past that Hugh had consistently scored off her ever since she at the age of fifteen had tried to stop him, aged four, from licking the contents of the nursery scuttle. It was true she had prevented him, but at what a cost to herself, for Hugh had bided his revenge; and two months later, when she had gone up to her room to put on her new hat for Easter morning, she had found it a dishevelled nest of coal.

However, dear Syd seemed hopeful, and perhaps in him Hugh would at last meet his match.

"But he's up to every low trick, Syd," she warned her betrothed on the platform of Waterloo Station, where about ten of a fine morning in early October, she was bidding him God-speed for his tussle with her brother.

"Don't fret, Hil," said Syd as confidently as if he spelt his name C-I-D and was at once both a hero of chivalry and an arm of the law.

"And you won't forget to bring back Harold's aquarium with you? Now cook has left, he is anxious about his pets, poor boy, for his cousins would take a delight in starving his little sticklebacks to death."

"I won't forget his aquarium. I suppose it's a kind of tank?" he murmured in a voice rich with sympathetic appreciation of what that meant.

"It is good of you, Syd," she said gratefully.

And the noise of Syd's farewell kiss was drowned in the whistle of the guard.

"I wonder what this rubber-necked ham-cured pirate wants with me," Hugh was saying to George down at Ambles, as Sydney leaned back in his corner of the compartment and tried to blot out the depressing chimneyscape of Nine Elms by taking a long swig at his flask.

"Wants to borrow money, I expect," George answered.

"Probably," Hugh agreed. "I think I'll drive in with the dog-cart and meet the bounder, and if he does want to borrow money I'll push him back to London by the

train that leaves Wrottesford twenty minutes after he due to arrive."

"Aren't these infernal women all clearing out to-day ?" George asked.

"Yes, but Mrs. Huggins has promised to do what sh can. However, I'll pay Hilda out for this somehov That sister of ours is not human, George. She's not eve semi-human. She's a cross between a crocodile and a alligator. She has deliberately given them a fortnight holiday out of the month in order to spite us. Luckil Huggins won't leave, at any rate until the chrysanthemum are over. I wish Johnnie would hurry up and come bacl We shall soon be wanting this capital for our hotel. Jame ought to be good for a thousand, and if Johnnie cove that we should start off well."

"I'm not going to discuss any plans until the Cesarewitc has been run," George laid down like a Mede.

"I tried to get a hold over Jane and Ethel," Hug went on, "by telling them I'd guarantee that Pobjo should marry one or the other of them before Christma if they would stay on. But that confounded Hilda pu it into their heads we wouldn't pay their wages, and o top of that Pobjoy's father goes and dies, and he's gon home to look after his mother at the other end of th county. Still, it's the darkest hour before the dawn George old boy."

"Yes, and thank god, I can usually manage to slee through it," said George fervently.

Bertram and Viola were not about when Huggins drov the dog-cart round for their uncle ; so Hugh drove in alon to meet Mr. Sydney Ricketts, who greeted him with s little effusiveness that he knew at once that, for whatev reason he had come down to Hampshire, it was not t borrow money. His curiosity was roused. He suggeste a little something at the Blue Dragon to fortify them selves for the drive out to Ambles.

Sydney accepted Hugh's offer with dignity, partl because he genuinely required a drink after the journe

but chiefly because he had been accustomed for so many years now to find himself an easy victor when somebody was bold enough to venture to keep pace with him in liquor. Sydney was at his mental best and strongest when the man on the other side was rapidly receding in evolution toward the protoplasmic globule from which he had originated.

"What's yours?" Hugh asked in the snuggery.

Sydney eyed Hugh rather in the way a golfer eyes the lie of his ball before he decides which club will suit the occasion.

"A gin and angostura," he said. He had decided to drive off with gin, approach with whisky, and if necessary, which he thought unlikely, stymie Hugh on the green with brandy.

"One gin and angostura, Mrs. Pringle," said Hugh. "And I think I'll have a brandy."

Sydney jerked his chin back like a man who has nearly bumped into something he had not been expecting, and Mrs. Pringle shook a plump reproving finger.

"A bit early in the day for your usual, isn't it?" she suggested.

"There's a nip in the air this morning," said Hugh as he proceeded to counteract it homeopathically with the nip in his glass.

Sydney hastily swallowed his pink gin and asked Hugh what was his.

"Well," said Hugh, looking at his watch, "I suppose it is a bit early for another brandy, but still . . . all right, the same, Mrs. Pringle."

Sydney threw away his iron, and drew a brassy from his bag.

"I'll have the same as Mr. Touchwood, miss."

Sydney never paid any attention to the human being who served his wants behind the counter. To him every female in that position was "miss," every male, "Charlie."

"Hark at that now," Mrs. Pringle laughed. "He'll have me in short frocks before I know where I am."

"This is Mr. Sydney Ricketts of British Honduras said Hugh. "This is my very good friend, Mrs. Pringle he told the visitor.

"Yes, you and your British Honduras perhaps! she jeered amiably. "I suppose that's the place Jack fou when he climbed to the top of the beanstalk?"

"It's where I come from, Miss . . . us Pringle," Sydn affirmed.

"He's determined to turn me back into one of the fooli virgins, isn't he?" she laughed. "Oh, so you come fro British Honduras, do you? Did you look in at the mo on your way?"

"But really, Mrs. Pringle, he does come from there Hugh insisted. "He grows mahogany, don't you, M Ricketts?"

"Very nice too," said Mrs. Pringle sceptically. "W the chest-of-drawers crop a good one this year?"

"And logwood," added Sydney.

"Well, we don't have to go to British Honduras to gr logwood. We can grow that in Hampshire."

Sydney shook his head gravely.

"I don't think so."

"Can't grow logwood in Hampshire?" she exclaim incredulously. "Why, only yesterday I was ordering our logs for the winter."

"Ah, but this is a special tree used for dyeing," Sydn explained earnestly.

"What, do you mean they build gallows of it?"

"No, no, for staining. I'll show you a photograph me and my boys loading it up."

He took out his pocket-book and produced a photograph himself and some Indians loading logwood up the Moho riv

"Your boys?" Mrs. Pringle gasped. "Why, they niggers. Eight little nigger boys travelling in Devon, c said he'd stay there, and then there were seven. Well would never have said a fresh-complexioned man like y would have a family as dark as all that."

"They're not my children," Sydney interrupted hasti

the fibres of his neck working like pulleys in the excitement of the disclaimer. "They're my labourers. We call them 'boys' out in B.H."

"Language, language," she reproved.

Sydney gave up, and forgetting it was Hugh's turn for drinks, ordered two more brandies on his own.

"This man's bent on pickling me, Mrs. Pringle," Hugh observed.

"He'll find it hard," she retorted. "I'd as soon try to pickle Cleopatra's Needle."

Sydney smiled to himself at her innocence, and joined Hugh in a fourth brandy to make all square.

When they were leaving the snuggery to drive out to Ambles, Mrs. Pringle called Hugh back for a moment.

"You mind out for yourself, Mr. Touchwood," she warned him. "You didn't see the way the muscles of his neck were working all the time he was looking at you under his eyelids. He's up to no good, that fellow. I reckon he just about does come from B.H., and I wouldn't care to lay a shilling he wasn't Mephisteeleves himself. I once saw Henry Irving in that part, and he had just the same nasty red look as this fellow has. You mind out, and keep your eyes a bit more wide open than your mouth."

It was not a good lunch, for Mrs. Huggins with the five little Hugginses to look after, not to mention a husband, had been flustered enough already by the prospect of catering for George, Hugh, and the two children. When she had heard a visitor might be coming, she had lost her head completely. Moreover, her *pièce de résistance*, a lemon-sponge, was drunk by Bertram and Viola while it was standing on a cool window-sill, waiting to set. However, there was plenty of whisky; and, when Hugh led the way to the library for the discussion of business afterwards, Sydney felt pretty sure of himself. In any case he had not expected a good lunch, for he had already heard from Hilda of the revenge she had taken upon her two brothers by getting rid of the domestic staff.

"Well, Ricketts," said Hugh, "what is this busine exactly? I say, your glass is empty."

He poured out a tremendous whisky for his guest and not less tremendous one for himself.

Sydney let him put it away, and noticing that he fanci was a slight opacity in Hugh's eye judged the moment be ripe. What he failed to realize, however, was that t opacity in Hugh's eye was caused more by the opacity his own eye than that last tumblerful of whisky.

"It's like this, Tushwood," he began thickly. " understand you're not very anxious to join me in B.H.?

"Not a bit," Hugh admitted frankly.

"Perfeckly understand, old man, perfeckly understan It's very hot out there, you know, and I think you'd fi it so hot that you'd be very hot all the time."

"I probably should."

"I'm glad we understand one another, Tushwoo Because I think we shall be able to do business togeth That's what I've come here for. To do business. I'm business man, and so I always like to do business befo pleasure."

"I see," said Hugh.

Sydney blinked. He fancied he had heard that phra before somewhere. And anyway it had an uncomfortab likeness to the "I'll see you" of an opponent at pok who holds a flush over your pair of jacks.

"I'm very glad you can see, Tushwood," he said wi an idiotic laugh. "Because I was momentararily, I s I was momentararily under the impression that y couldn't see. Well, this is what I've been thinking. He are you over there and there am I over here." He wrestl for a moment or two with this geographical problem, a then gave it up in a daze. "Well, we're both over he just now, so let's leave that out of it."

"By all means," Hugh agreed.

"Thanks very mush, Tushwood. It's a pleasure to business with a man who comes to the point at on without beating about the bush, because a bird in t

hand is worth two in the bush. You see eye to eye with me about that ? "

" Perfectly."

" I'm very gratified to hear you see eye to eye with me. Now, your money in B.H. is a bird in the bush, if you follow me. The oof-bird in the bush." Sydney laughed idiotically again. " Two thousand pounds in the bush, eh ? "

Hugh looked sharply across the table at him. He had heard nothing from John's solicitors about the visit of Sydney Ricketts, and he had no idea that Sydney had even met Hilda. At the same time it might be a false move to pretend he was still the sole claimant to the two thousand pounds. Luckily Sydney went on without waiting for him to commit himself.

" Two thousand pounds in the bush. That's what worries me. It's all in the bush, Tushwood. And I'd so mush rather you had one thousand pounds in your hand. So mush rather I would, Tushwood, I would."

" Nothing doing," Hugh rapped out. " To begin with, there's no earthly reason why you should take two thousand pounds from my brother John and propose to stick to one half of it yourself a few months later."

" Stick to it ? " repeated Sydney. " Not at all. It's you who's sticking to it. " You're sticking to it like a postage lamp or a stimpet."

" I am," said Hugh firmly. " And I intend to go on sticking to it. In fact I'm seriously thinking of joining you in B.H. next month."

Sydney groped for the whisky bottle in a haze of disappointment which alcohol was fast rendering impenetrable.

" I see," he muttered, and it was certainly not an appropriate phrase for him at that moment. " Well," he went on gloomily, " all I can say is you'll find it very hot out there. Look here, Tushwood, I don't like to be obstinate. I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll give you two thousand pounds. That's a thousand pounds in each hand out of one bush, which I call more than fair."

"Nothing doing," said Hugh.

"I'll give you three thousand. Three thousand love spondulicks, Tushwood."

Hugh shook his head.

"Sorry, Ricketts. But I'm afraid you'll have to p up with me as a partner."

"But look here, Tushwood," Sydney protested, "th is a family matter. You're treating me as if I was perfeck stranger."

"I don't see that it's a family matter at all."

"Yes, it is, Tushwood, because you're my futu stepbrother."

"Have another whisky, Ricketts, and then perha you'll kindly adopt me," Hugh suggested.

"No, I've adopted little Harold, Tushwood. Y know little Harold, whom you shut up in a sack of flo and tried to bake? You oughtn't to have done th Tushwood. Hil won't forgive you for wanting to ma shortbread of Harold. You'll find it very uncomforta living out in B.H. with Hil and sonny Harold. Bet take four thousand pounds and stay where you are."

Hugh's mind was always a rapid one, and alcol merely quickened it. He wasted no time in questio The march of events was clear to him.

"Five thousand," he said.

"That's five times what you're entitled to. You wa more than a bush will hold, Tushwood."

"It will be six in another minute," Hugh told h coldly.

Sydney poured himself out what was left in the bottle

"All right," he groaned; and, sinking back into depths of the arm-chair, he stared fixedly at the books the shelves for a couple of minutes. "I'm afraid I wo be able to count those books this afternoon, Tushwoo he said at last in a tone of regretful apology. "T bounders keep playing leap-frog with one another."

"Ricketts," said Hugh solemnly, "you did a luc day's work when you got engaged to my sister Hilda."

"Woman in a thousand. Woman in five thousand," Sydney muttered fatuously. "Getting licensed by marriage next week."

"Because if you weren't going to marry Hilda and taking her with you to B.H.," Hugh continued, "you wouldn't have bought me out for twenty thousand! You must have struck it mighty rich to make it worth your while to marry Hilda. In fact, I'm afraid I've let you off too lightly. Still, as you wisely observed, a bird in the hand is worth two in the B.H. bush. But listen, Ricketts, I want that cheque for five thousand within a week, or the deal's off. And now tell me, what's the stuff?"

"Auriferush quartz, Tushwood."

"Gold?"

"That's right. Colour of the last whisky I had," Sydney sighed blissfully.

Hugh bit his lips. Gold was it? Perhaps he had let his claim go too cheaply. Still, there was always a possibility that the agreement between him and Hilda might be held invalid in law. And five thousand pounds was a nice neat little sum. A very nice neat little sum. . . .

Hugh left Sydney to doze quietly for a couple of hours. Truth to tell, in spite of his elation, he felt much inclined to follow his example, and he did.

Soon after five o'clock Hugh drove his future brother-in-law back to the station.

"Hullo, it's raining, Touchwood," he observed. His speech was much clearer since the nap; but his mind was not yet completely master of cause and effect, for it was not raining. Indeed, the sky was cloudless. The moisture he detected was an occasional dollop of water from Harold's aquarium, which was resting between the splashboard and his feet.

A week later Hugh received a cheque for five thousand pounds and a note which was signed:

Your ever affectionate,
brother-in-law,
Sydney.

It contained this postscript :

If Hilda should ever mention the subject of our littl business talk at Ambles, I'd be glad if you wouldn' let her know I paid you more than a thousand pound for your claim. S. R.

Sydney had been compelled to plead the hard work i had been and the mental concentration if had involved t buy Hugh out for a thousand pounds in order to offe some justification for arriving back with Harold's aquariur empty except for one freshwater snail, a quantity of ciga ash, and the sodden remains of *The Evening News*.

By the same post that Hugh received the cheque frot his brother-in-law there came a letter from a friend to sa that if he could put his hand on some capital there wa now a chance to buy as fine a partnership in an architect' business as had been on the market for years.

Hugh decided to run up to London and investigate A fortnight of Ambles with only Mrs. Huggins to look afte the household had tried Hugh severely. It might nc have been so bad if Bertram and Viola had not bee seized with a passion to help in the cooking ; but they hac

" Is this coffee ? " he had asked that very mornin when Viola brought him up his breakfast, for he and Georg had decided that, if neither of them got up till lunch, i would somehow help considerably to lighten the burde of the housework.

" Yes, what did you think it was ? "

" I couldn't imagine," he had been forced to reply " I had a vague idea for a moment that it was licoric water, but it's too nasty even for that."

Then Viola had smelt it and gone off into a peal laughter.

" It isn't coffee at all, you silly. It's tea."

" Taste it," he had adjured.

And she had flattered his sense of taste sufficiently pull a wry face over the experiment.

At that moment Bertram had burst into the room.

"I say, you fat ass, you took the wrong pot up. That's some water which was left over when I washed up."

This decided Hugh that he required a holiday in town, a holiday combined with business, for the problem of running an hotel was beginning to seem quite insuperable. Moreover, the prospect of success somehow looked less convincing when it had become a question of investing his own money in it. After all, he was an architect, not an hotel-keeper. He felt a little guilty at leaving the children with George; but he salved his conscience by giving them a fiver apiece to spend as they would, and he begged Mrs. Pringle to invite them over to the Blue Dragon as often as possible.

A few days after Hugh had left Ambles, the children came back from a long walk with Beyle in the yellowing woods to find their father rushing about the house with an energy that in all their lives they had never seen him display before.

"What's the matter?" they cried. And Beyle barked his interrogations with no less astonishment than they.

"My horse has won!" George shouted.

"Woof-woof-woof!" Beyle exclaimed, his head thrown back to give his chest its fullest expansion for those deep congratulatory barks.

"What horse?" the children asked, for to them all their father's horses were fabulous as unicorns.

"The Cesarewitch!" George cried. "Where's my overcoat? I'm off up to town by the 5.56. I must see about laying against my horse in the Cambridgeshire and making sure of a thousand at least. The first time in twenty-one years! I shan't be back till the Cambridgeshire is run. You'll be all right down here. I've packed my bag. I'll leave some money with Mrs. Huggins. Perhaps your mother will get down on Sunday."

They saw their father off from the station; and then they sought out Mrs. Pringle in the snuggery, which was full of local worthies.

"Hullo, Mrs. Pringle. We're all alone at Ambles now," Bertram told her. "So could you let us have twelve tins of sardines, please, to take back with us this evening?"

"And two large tins of mixed biscuits," Viola added, putting down upon the counter her uncle's five-pound note.

"And three brandies, please," Bertram concluded, offering his five-pound note.

"Good land alive!" Mrs. Pringle gasped. "Whereve did I put that fan of mine?"

"One of the brandies is for Huggins. He's outsid with the mare," Bertram explained with a polite smile for he supposed it must be the third brandy which ha put Mrs. Pringle in such need of fresh air.

CHAPTER XVI

OCTOBER WISDOM

THROUGH the Southampton Customs walked a fair, an almost florid man in the early forties, rather under six feet in height, with sanguine blue eyes and full but cleanly cut lips. He bore a remarkable likeness to that aspect of George which was revealed on the afternoon he heard that the horse he had backed was the winner of the Cesarewitch. The indolent George who sat all day in an arm-chair, browsing over evening papers or knitting, could only have been called a caricature of this active and genial personality who was so evidently solicitous for the comfort of that charming slim young woman of about thirty, whose tailor-made tweed became so well her violet-brown eyes and rose-leaf complexion.

"Almost exactly a year ago to-day, Doris, I was seeing you and Ida Merritt through the Customs at Liverpool," John Touchwood reminded his wife.

She turned round with an affectionate smile.

"Dear John, did you think that might have been forgotten?"

"I'm glad we didn't come back last month in the *Bombastic*," he went on. "But in a way I'm sorry we didn't cross in our old friend the *Murmania*. Still, I couldn't resist landing at Southampton and motoring up in this glorious October weather to catch them all unawares at Ambles."

"It will serve you right," she told him, "if they decline to open the door for you."

"Oh, they'll be too much taken up with that quarre over the ownership of the canoe to bother about bein offended with me. Besides, by this time one or two o them will certainly be wanting to borrow some mor money."

The last news of the family John had heard on hi travels had been those letters of the solicitors about th canoe. He had no idea that the author of the successfu drama now running at the Trafalgar Theatre was hi elder brother James, for James had chosen to write unde a pseudonym. He knew nothing of Hilda's marriage t Sydney Ricketts. He was even ignorant that Laurenc was now the Rector of Upper Langdale-cum-Trotby.

"John," said his wife earnestly, "I want you to giv up this cynical attitude about your relations. You see my dear, I can't help feeling that I'm chiefly responsibl for it. It wasn't till I came on the scene that you bega to suspect their sincerity. They recognized in me a enemy from the very start. And that was why they le their tongues run away with them about you and me."

"They'd no right to say the things they did," he growle obstinately.

"No, John, they hadn't. But you and I have been s happy, and we are so happy now, and I want to be friend with them. And I want you to be friends with them. So to please me, John dearest, even if they do want to borro a little more money, lend it to them gladly. Suppose, fo instance, they *are* all quarrelling together at Amble well, why not offer to buy the house back from them Don't you think that would be a nice idea? And want you to give James back his pictures and his silve Oh, I know from one point of view you were absolutel justified; but still, you and I love one another so deepl that I can't bear you to be anything but quixotic. Yo see, I don't love you because you are a practical hard headed man of business with a strong sense of property I love you just because you are not that. I love yo because you are a romantic old duffer with a delightf

sense of humour which was never meant to be curdled. Yes, yes, you can look as indignant as you like. I know I talked in a very different way a year ago. But, John dear, a year ago I was close on thirty and beginning to wonder why I couldn't find the right man. I was rather proud of my worldly wisdom when it looked like being all the wisdom I should ever have; but now I don't seem to think quite so much of worldly wisdom. There, now you can talk as much as you like, and I promise never to make such a long speech again for the rest of our lives."

But somehow John no longer wanted to talk. He felt too ridiculously happy to be sitting beside Doris in this Daimler Silent Knight and holding her hand while they drove through the golden English country under a pale blue October sky. Moreover, in his heart he was really delighted to have found a good reason to be friends with his family again.

"Wrottesford looks exactly the same," he said as they drove through the old market town, where the clock in the church steeple was striking four.

A few minutes later they were running more slowly along the lane to Ambles between high hazel hedges of golden brown. John had chosen the less frequented road by the sycamore avenue and the Hanger, up the diagonal slopes of which the Silent Knight sped as if indeed it were a Silent Knight out of Malory, riding to the relief of some distressed damsel through this russet world.

At the top of the Hanger the car emerged upon that wide stretch of common land, the ancient hawthorns scattered about which were now in full crimson berry. And there on the other side of the common, flanked by shelving woods of oak and beech and backed by rising downs on which a milky sky ruffled its breast like a huge swan lazily floating, stood Ambles, that solitary, deep-hued Elizabethan house, with dreaming chimney-stacks and tumbled mossy roofs, and garden walls rising from the heaped amethysts of innumerable Michaelmas daisies.

"It's a glorious house," said John with a sigh.

"Yes, and I think you'll have to buy it back from th family," his wife told him.

"I really think I will," he agreed.

The Silent Knight stopped at the front door.

"I don't think I'll ring," said John. "I can't quit realize the house is no longer mine."

He and Doris stood in the hall, listening like two childre who have stolen into an enchanted castle.

"Everything sounds very quiet," he murmured "Perhaps they're all out in the garden. Nobody in m library—in their library, I mean," he corrected himsel He glanced round the room critically. "It looks tidie than I expected. James himself never knew how t treat books. Reviewers seldom do. Still, I'm boun to say he doesn't seem to have gored them too much."

"Plenty of dust," Doris commented, writing larg initials across the surface of that famous mahogan table.

"Ah, yes, it is rather dusty, isn't it?" he agreed "But I think I should have noticed it was in a minute."

"I should think you would," she laughed.

John walked across to open the dining-room door.

"Good heavens, Doris!" he cried. "Do come in her It's like the Mad Hatter's tea-party."

And certainly the dining-room did present an extra ordinary sight, for it was covered with plates, dishe saucers, cups, and glasses of every size and pattern, som of which were clean, but most of which were covered wit the remains of sardines and the pink, white, and brow crumbs of mixed biscuits, two large seven-pound tins which occupied the centre of the table.

"What an amazing way to run a house!" Joh exclaimed. "I think Hilda must have quarrelled wit the others already . . . and of course Eleanor's actin in town . . . but then there's Beatrice and Edith. C do you think all the women have declared war?"

While they were contemplating this fantastic tabl there was a tap at the door, and in answer to John

bidding a large fawn-coloured bulldog entered, with wagging tail and frog-like smile.

"James's dog!" John exclaimed. "Look out, he's apt to be rather a savage brute."

But Beyle was no longer savage. His master's success, coupled with the intimate communion he had been enjoying for the last two months with Bertram and Viola, had softened his view of strangers. He retired under the sideboard and emerged again with one of his rocks, which he deposited with a crash at Doris's feet.

"He wants me to throw it for him, the old darling," she said.

"Woof! Woof!" Beyle assented.

"Where's your master?" John asked.

"Woof! Woof! Woof-woof-woof!" Beyle replied, which was not quite explicit enough as an attempt to let John know that his master and mistress were at this moment eating rosy golden pears outside a café in a sunny old Dijon street.

"I don't believe there's a soul about this afternoon," John declared. "They must have been discouraged by the sight of this table and all gone out for a picnic or something."

Beyle ran to the door, looked back over his shoulder, wagged his tail furiously, and barked an obvious invitation to follow him.

"He's going to show us where they all are," Doris exclaimed.

"That's right! Woof!" said Beyle, galumphing ahead and looking back to bark encouragement. Then he suddenly remembered his stone, and with a woof of apology ran back to fetch it. However, on his way upstairs, for it was thither he was leading them, he decided that the stone would be quite happy without being carried any farther. About half-way up he dropped it, looking back to tell his protégé to behave itself and remain where he had put it until he came back.

Still preceded by Beyle, John and Doris reached a door

on which a large card was hanging inscribed SNUGGER
LATE SCHOOLROOM, behind which could be heard t
noise of what sounded like an unusually jolly party.

"I'd better knock," John suggested.

"Yes, yes," Doris said quickly.

So John knocked. The noise of social merrime
ceased abruptly, and John knocked again.

From within the voice of Bertram rang out:

"Oh, come in, whoever you are!"

So they entered.

Afterwards, when John told this story, he alwa
declared that for several seconds he did genuinely thi
that Ambles had been bewitched and that he and Do
had trespassed upon a scene from some tattered o
fairy-book. At the head of the schoolroom table w
seated an extremely stout woman in purple satin, on t
top of whose elaborate coiffure was stuck a sugar-lo
cap of bright pink paper. On one side of her was h
niece Viola dressed in a low-neck evening dress, her ha
done in an attempt to emulate the bee-skep mode of h
neighbour. On the other side was his nephew Bertra
in an Eton suit, to the jacket of which had been sev
two tails, while instead of an Eton collar he was weari
a stuck-up collar, into which the larger part of his fa
had subsided like a pink cornflour mould. The oth
guests included a fine specimen of a yeoman farmer wh
was wearing a green paper crown, the farmer's wife wi
was wearing a light blue cocked hat, Mrs. Huggins, whc
headgear was a scarlet cap of liberty, and Huggins himse
who for some reason had been made to wrap himself rou
with a flowered table-cloth. In the middle of the tab
was a huge sugared cake lighted up with about fifty candl

"Hullo," said Bertram in hospitable accents. "Is th
you, uncle John? I say, how ripping; you can come
Mrs. Pringle's birthday party. But you must wear a ca
Hullo, aunt Doris, were you sick on the steamer when y
came over from America? Here's a rather decent oran
cap for you, if you can squash in beside Huggins."

Huggins, who was trying to disentangle himself from the table-cloth in order to apologize to his master, held up a protesting hand. Huggins was obviously suffering. He did not relish being discovered in that table-cloth by the person who paid his wages; and as for poor Mrs. Huggins, she looked ready to melt right away with embarrassment.

"So this is your uncle John, of whom I've heard you talk so much?" said Mrs. Pringle, completely unperturbed by the situation in which she had been discovered. "It's to be hoped he and Mrs. Touchwood like sardines and rich plum-cake for their tea."

"Where's Harold?" John asked.

"Don't you know?" Viola exclaimed. "He's bunked from here because uncle Hugh shut him up in the old mill."

"He's going to British Honduras," said Bertram, "because aunt Hilda's married a man called Sydney Ricketts, who made V and I nearly burst with laughing, because he came down to Ambles and he took Harold's aquarium with him and he tripped up over one of Beyle's stones in the hall and simply slooshed himself with water."

Viola's laugh rippled at the memory as she took up the tale:

"And a stickleback fell out, and Beyle tried to worry it, and he got in a most frightful lather. He kept picking it up and shaking it and spitting it out. And then father trod on it and got in a most frightful wax and said Beyle ought to be shot."

"And where's your father now?" John asked.

"Oh, father went away about a week ago because he had a horse who won, and mother's coming down next Sunday; but she couldn't come this Sunday, because she's seeing about touring companies for uncle James's play at the Trafalgar Theatre."

"James's play?" repeated John in a dazed voice.

"Yes, didn't you know?" Viola asked. "He's had a frightfully successful play, and he's gone to France for a holiday with aunt Beatrice, and I think he gave father

some money to win this race with. And uncle Hugh' got some money."

"Hugh's got some money?" John interrupted nervously a vision of somebody's cheque-book floating like a clou across the jolly atmosphere of the room. "How did h get any money?"

"Uncle Syd gave it to him," said Bertram, and at th mention of uncle Syd he and his sister had to indulge in long outburst of ungovernable laughter before Viola coul go on:

"Uncle Hugh was frightfully decent. He gave us fiv pounds each, and this is our party to Mrs. Pringle an Farmer Pocock and Mrs. Pocock, because we've had som simply spiffing teas with them, haven't we, Bertram?"

"Rather, absolutely fizzing," Bertram agreed enthu siastically. On the subject of Mrs. Pringle and the Pocock his sister was licensed to gush to her girlish heart's conten "And Mrs. Huggins has been awfully decent and let u manage the house in the way we wanted to manage it But she simply hates the way we like to wash up onl once a week. She groans like anything whenever she goe into the dining-room, don't you, Mrs. Huggins?"

"I'm really very sorry, sir, you should have come i upon us unexpected like this," poor Mrs. Huggins begar "but you see, with all the maids gone and Mrs. Smith, was rather put to it how to manage, and though I begge and implored Master Bertram and Miss Viola not to ea nothing but sardines and mixed biscuits and let me coo them something proper, they were so much took up wit this notion of housekeeping . . ."

"Don't worry the poor man now, Mrs. Huggins," Mr Pringle intervened. "The children have been quite a right, and they've enjoyed their week's beano; but think it's just about time they settled down into bein ordinary children again."

So John, and Doris, who could not ask any questions fo laughing, sat down to tea. Nor would they hear of M and Mrs. Huggins's retiring, though nothing would induc

Huggins to don the table-cloth again, in spite of Bertram's protest that he could not be the Lord High Chancellor unless he did.

Suddenly, in the midst of the general merriment, an anxious expression passed over John's countenance.

"Where's uncle Laurence?" he asked nervously.

"Oh, he's gone to Yorkshire to be a clergyman again," said Bertram.

"He's a rector," said Viola.

Whereupon they once more indulged in one of their duets of ungovernable laughter, banging upon the table with their fists in an ecstasy of humorous appreciation.

And really this tale may almost come to an end with that solemn thought which so much tickled Bertram and Viola, for there is little to add except that John's relations insisted on giving Ambles back to him, and, what is more, with genuine gratitude. In spite of their absurd adventures in it as a community, the mellow old house had brought them all good luck.

Laurence remained Rector of Upper Langdale-cum-Trotby, and soon after going to Yorkshire gave up ghosts for golf, at which he was not much better, though he became a great theorist of the game. Hugh bought his partnership and prospered reasonably as an architect. George's horse did not win the Cambridgeshire; but he managed to lay the odds at a long price against his own horse and so ensure himself a pleasant little sum. James continued to write successful plays under a pseudonym, though none so successful as that first one he began as a joke. Eleanor flourished with James. Beatrice had a wonderful boudoir of her own in London. Edith became prominent in diocesan business. Frida's roses returned and she joined the Girl Guides. Bertram and Viola both went to boarding-schools; but they always spent their holidays at Ambles and ate many more tins of sardines and mixed biscuits in Mrs. Pringle's hospitable house.

Last, but by no means least, Harold won a scholarship

at Rugborough, and Hilda reduced Sydney to lime-juic in less than a year.

It was after a jolly party that Christmas, at which Jame Beatrice, George, Eleanor, Hugh, Bertram, Viola, an Beyle were present as the guests of John and Doris t celebrate the formal giving back of Ambles, that Jam said to John:

"I hope you'll keep me up to the mark, old man."

"In what way?"

"Why, in the way of knowing how to remain an Ap fool when one has discovered at last how to become one."

And the brothers shook hands on that resolve.

Upstairs, two small pairs of elbows were leaning on th sill of an open window and two small heads close togeth were gazing up at a frosty sky of stars.

"It's rather stinking that Christmas is over," Bertra was saying.

"Awfully stinking," his sister agreed.

"Still, it isn't a hundred days now to April Fools' Da next year," said Bertram. "And I've thought of son frightfully good jokes to play."

"But we'll be at boarding-school," she reminded him.

"Good lummy! I never thought of that," he groane "Still the Easter hols won't be long then. And M Pringle says she's going to send us hampers all next ter She's an awful ripper," he sighed.

And once again the rule was broken. Their hands m in appreciation of Mrs. Pringle.

THE END

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